THE HOUSE OF MEMORY: A STUDY OF THE RELATION BETWEEN RETROSPECTION AND CONTEMPORARY SATIRE IN THE EVOLUTION OF DICKENS' LATER NOVELS, 1846-1865.

by

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PREFACE

No student of Dickens can hope to understand the extent of his debt to other scholars and critics in the field, least of all one who has chosen to concentrate on the question of Dickens' attitudes to contemporary society and to his past. But I know that I have received particular stimulus from Edmund Wilson's essay in The Wound and the Bow, from Humphry House's The Dickens World, and from the recent work of Philip Collins, K.J. Fielding, Robert Garis, Edgar Johnson, and Sylvère Monod. More specific debts are acknowledged in the course of the thesis.

The approach is my own, however, and this study presents the results of independent research into Dickens' life, writings, and period. In addition to taking a fresh look at the autobiographical element in his fiction, I have discovered new information about the educational satire in Hard Times; this is incorporated in Chapter III, and was published separately as "The Gradgrind School: Political Economy in the Classroom," in Victorian Studies, XI (December, 1967), 207-24.

My greatest debt in the writing of this thesis has been to my supervisor, Professor K.J. Fielding. He has helped in countless ways, not only with advice and information generously given, but also through the patience, kindness, and sympathy he has consistently shown to me over the past four years.

C O N T E N T S

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Throughout this thesis the place of publication for works referred to is London, unless otherwise stated.

The following abbreviations are used for the titles of books by Dickens:

B.H.	Bleak House	M.C.	Martin Chuzzlewit
C.B.	Christmas Books	O.M.F.	Our Mutual Friend
Clock	Master Humphrey's Clock	O.T.	Oliver Twist
D.C.	David Copperfield	P.P.	Pickwick Papers
D. & S.	Dombey and Son	R.P.	Reprinted Pieces
E.D.	The Mystery of Edwin Drood	T.T.C.	A Tale of Two Cities
G.E.	Great Expectations	U.T.	The Uncommercial Traveller
H.T.	Hard Times		

With the exception of Hard Times, all these works are cited in The Oxford Illustrated Edition (1947-58); references to Hard Times are to the "Norton Critical Edition" of the novel, edited by George Ford and Sylvère Monod (New York, 1966). In the case of the novels discussed at length, quotations in the text are followed by a reference (in brackets) to chapter and page-number, or to Book, chapter, and page-number; all other references are identified in footnotes.

For Dickens' letters, speeches, and journalism, the following editions have been used and are cited by these abbreviations:

A.Y.R. All The Year Round. 1859-70.

Coutts Letters from Charles Dickens to Angela Burdett-Coutts. Edited by Edgar Johnson. 1953.

C.P.	Collected Papers. "Biographical Edition of the Works of Charles Dickens." 1906.
H.W.	Household Words. 1850-59.
N	The Letters of Charles Dickens. Edited by Walter Dexter. Nonesuch Press. 3 vols. 1938.
M.P.	Miscellaneous Papers. "The Biographical Edition of the Works of Charles Dickens." 1908.
Speeches	The Speeches of Charles Dickens. Edited by K.J. Fielding. Oxford, 1960.

The following works have also been frequently referred to, and are cited by these abbreviations:

Forster	John Forster. Life of Charles Dickens (1872-74). Edited by J.W.T. Ley. 1928.
Johnson	Edgar Johnson. Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph. 2 vols. New York, 1952.

Several references have been made in the course of this study to the poetry of Wordsworth; unless otherwise stated, the following edition has been used:

The Poetical Works of Wordsworth. "Oxford Standard Authors" edition. Edited by Thomas Hutchinson and revised by Ernest de Selincourt. 1936.

SUMMARY

This thesis is a study of the rôle which memory plays in Dickens' development as a novelist and social critic in the second half of his career, from 1846 to 1865. The central argument is that Dickens' attitude to society was intimately bound up with his attitudes to himself and his past (in particular the memory of his childhood sufferings in London), and that it changed as he made successive attempts to explore and interpret the past in his fiction. The approach is a chronological one, beginning in the eighteen-forties with the Christmas Books and Dombey and Son, and ending with Our Mutual Friend, Dickens' last completed novel. Within this period I have given prominence, in Chapters II, IV, and VI, to the three novels which are especially retrospective in nature--David Copperfield, Little Dorrit, and Great Expectations--and it is in the light of the autobiographical patterns revealed in these novels that I have discussed the growth and decline of Dickens' reformist activities in the eighteen-fifties and sixties. The relationship between his fiction and journalism at the time of Bleak House and Hard Times is investigated in Chapter III, and in Chapter V the Uncommercial Traveller articles are discussed, both as autobiographical documents and as evidence of Dickens' changing attitudes to the world in which he was living. With Great Expectations, so I have argued in Chapter VI, Dickens made a final attempt to come to terms with his past, and in doing so produced his most profound commentary on the Victorian experience. The concluding chapter is devoted to a consideration of the changes which took place in Dickens' moral and social outlook after Great Expectations, as these are reflected in Our Mutual Friend.

INTRODUCTION

DICKENS AND THE PAST

"But the windows of the house of Memory, and the windows of the house of Mercy, are not so easily closed as windows of glass and wood. They fly open unexpectedly ..."

("Somebody's Luggage," *Christmas Stories*)

In "A Christmas Tree," an article written in 1850, Dickens confessed that "my thoughts are drawn back, by a fascination which I do not care to resist, to my own childhood."[1] It was a fascination which he seldom cared to resist, and his books are full of memories of his childhood and youth. But although it is generally agreed that Dickens "used the years of his youth with a persistence and confident exactness unequalled by any other writer whose youth was not, like Proust's, his one chosen subject," there has been as yet no detailed account of the role which memory plays in his work.[2] This study is an attempt to provide such an account, and to relate the way Dickens looked at himself and his past to the way he looked at contemporary society.

Dickens' relationship to his past is highly complex; it is bound up with his attitudes to himself and to society, and it undergoes successive transformations throughout his career. In the novels up to Martin Chuzzlewit he seems to have drawn upon his past unconsciously, showing little concern for the processes of memory. In the eighteen-forties his attitude became much more self-conscious: it was in these years that he started to write the story of his life, but then abandoned the project only to take it up again at the end of the decade in David Copperfield, his first attempt at

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1. H.W., II, 21 December 1850, 289.

2. Humphry House, The Dickens World (Second edition, 1942), p. 21. K.J. Fielding has raised some of the central issues in his valuable article on "Dickens and the Past: The Novelist of Memory," in Experience in the Novel, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce (New York and London, 1968), 107-31.

fictional autobiography. Between David Copperfield and Our Mutual Friend he made two further attempts to confront the past directly, in Little Dorrit and Great Expectations, and his interest in time and memory is evident in his letters, his journalism (particularly the Uncommercial Traveller articles), and in both Bleak House and A Tale of Two Cities. This period--from 1846, when he thought of writing his autobiography, to 1860-61, when he wrote Great Expectations--shows Dickens intensely preoccupied with his past, and it was in this period that many of his greatest social satires were written. My contention here is that the two interests were intimately related, and that Dickens changed and developed as a social critic as he became increasingly concerned with himself and his past.

This proposition is best explored through a discussion of individual novels, but something needs to be said at the outset about the recurrent memories in Dickens' work and about his attitude to these memories. The years between 1816 and 1836, as Humphry House points out, "could bring his imagination to a state of such intense creative excitement that he was sometimes tempted to draw on that time mechanically when other capital failed."[1] Within this period we can detect perhaps four areas of special resonance. There are, firstly, the memories of his childhood in the adjoining towns of Rochester and Chatham, where he lived from 1817, when he was five, until the winter of 1822, when the family moved to London. For much of his life he saw this time as

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1. Dickens World, p. 21.

a golden age, no doubt partly because of the misery which followed so shortly afterwards: Chatham is the real inspiration for the Yarmouth idyll in chapter iii of David Copperfield,[1] and Rochester appears in many of his books both under its own name and disguised as Dullborough, "our town" in Great Expectations, and Cloisterham in Edwin Drood. The second major area of the past to which Dickens returned constantly was the time of his father's imprisonment for debt in the Marshalsea and his own incarceration in the blacking warehouse; there are echoes of this in almost every book he wrote, and he confronted the memory directly in David Copperfield and Little Dorrit. His youth and early manhood in London provided the material and atmosphere for much of his work, and this period was particularly associated with his unhappy passion for Maria Beadnell: "...the most innocent, the most ardent, and the most disinterested days of my life had you for their sun," he wrote to her in 1855. "Whatever of fancy, romance, energy, passion, aspiration and determination belong to me, I never have separated and never shall separate from the hard-hearted little woman--you--whom it is nothing to say I would have died for, with the greatest alacrity!"[2] Dickens held on to this memory with astonishing intensity, but he was forced to revise it, and the contrast between Dora in David Copperfield and Flora in Little Dorrit is one of the

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1. After a reading of the Little Emily story in 1862, Dickens told his audience at the Chatham Mechanics' Institute that "he had found it difficult to disassociate the characters he had to represent from the very stones of Chatham" (Speeches, p. 301).
2. N, II, 628, 629; letter of 15 February 1855.

clearest signs of his changing attitude to the past in the eighteen-fifties. Finally, there is the memory of his wife's sister, Mary Hogarth, who lived in his household after his marriage and who died in Dickens' arms at the age of seventeen. She was the inspiration for all the pure women in his novels, from Rose Maylie to Little Dorrit, and he wore her ring until the day of his death.[1]

In terms of Dickens' attitude to society, the most significant area of his past was the experience in the blacking warehouse, and I agree with Edmund Wilson in finding, if not the whole of Dickens' career, then a substantial part of it to be "an attempt to digest these early shocks and hardships, to explain them to himself, to justify himself in relation to them, to give an intelligible and tolerable picture of a world in which such things could occur."[2] His father's arrest and imprisonment in the Marshalsea, the sudden disruption of family life, his own imprisonment as a wage-slave and the acute feelings of humiliation at the drudgery he had to endure: it is indeed difficult to exaggerate the importance of this episode in Dickens' creative life.

> No words can express the secret agony of my soul as I sunk into this companionship; compared these every day associates with those of my happier childhood; and felt my early hopes of growing up to be a learned and distinguished man, crushed in my breast. The deep remembrance of the sense I had of being utterly neglected and hopeless; of the shame I felt in my position; of the misery it was to my young heart to believe that, day by day, what I had learned, and thought, and delighted in, and raised my fancy and my emulation up by,

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1. He dreamed of her nightly for nine months, but on disclosing the dreams to his wife they stopped. For years it was his fervent desire to be buried beside her in Kensal Green Cemetery.

2. "Dickens: The Two Scrooges," The Wound and the Bow (Second edition, 1952), p. 7.

> was passing away from me, never to be brought back any more; cannot be written. My whole nature was so penetrated with the grief and humiliation of such considerations, that even now, famous and caressed and happy, I often forget in my dreams that I have a dear wife and children; even that I am a man; and wander desolately back to that time of my life.[1]

The shock to his system was such that he could never afterwards see the experience apart from his original perception of it, with all the feelings of betrayal, of inexplicable horror and shame, which it presented to his childhood imagination. This was the principal area of his past in which, as he himself later recognised, he "stopped growing."[2]

The important point about the blacking warehouse episode is that Dickens suffered at an early and defenceless age, so that for much of his creative life he continued to see his sufferings from the dramatic and simplified perspective of childhood, in terms of an absolute contrast between the abyss of poverty and the security of the middle class life from which he had felt disinherited. The fact that the moral contours of the experience were not so simple, that his parents were partly to blame for his suffering and that, in the warehouse itself, he had known kindness and even companionship from working class boys like Bob Fagin--this made the memory complicated and perpetually fascinating, and therefore subject to

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1. Forster, p. 26.

2. "There are real places people and places that we have never outgrown, though they themselves may have passed away long since: which we always regard with the eye and mind of childhood....We have never outgrown the rugged walls of Newgate, or any other prison on the outside. All within, is still the same blank of remorse and misery...." ("Where We Stopped Growing," H.W., VI, 1 January 1853, 362-63; M.P., pp. 361-63).

continual imaginative reinterpretation throughout his career. And as this reinterpretation took place, Dickens himself changed and his attitude to society changed.

There is of course widespread agreement among students of Dickens that he became a social reformer because he suffered in his childhood. But generally speaking those interested in Dickens' social criticism have tended to emphasise the novels of society to the exclusion of the more autobiographical work. Thus Edmund Wilson dismissed David Copperfield as "something in the nature of a holiday,"[1] an interruption of the main interests, and many critics have followed his lead in discerning the main line of Dickens' later development as a progression from Dombey and Son through Bleak House, Hard Times, and Little Dorrit, to Our Mutual Friend. A representative spokesman for this view can be found in Monroe Engel, who makes a division between the "Sense of Society" and the "Sense of Self."[2] Yet I would argue that the two cannot be separated, and that it was in the context of Dickens' deepening sense of himself that his sense of society was formed. He had to write David Copperfield before he could write Bleak House and Hard Times.

One advantage, then, of treating Dickens as a novelist of memory is that it may help us to understand and respect the essential continuity of his creative effort. But there is a further consideration raised by such an approach which is of great relevance

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1. The Wound and the Bow, p. 39.
2. The titles of Chapters Four and Five of his book, The Maturity of Dickens (Cambridge, Mass., 1959).

to any discussion of Dickens' relationship to the life of his times. For he not only drew extensively on his own past, he also tended to place the action of his novels in an earlier period. Pickwick Papers (1836-37) is set back to 1827; Bleak House (1852-53) to the early eighteen-forties; Little Dorrit (1855-57) to the mid-twenties; Great Expectations (1860-61) to the first third of the nineteenth century. It is noticeable, moreover, that Dickens' use of period detail becomes increasingly deliberate and consistent in the years after David Copperfield, until in Great Expectations the historical dimension is itself an important part of the book's meaning.

This imaginative tendency (which is clearly related to the autobiographical impulse) has not been sufficiently recognised, and yet as House pointed out,[1] it is of the greatest significance for anyone who wishes to treat the novels as historical or social documents. It raises several questions about the kind of criticism Dickens made of the world in which he was living. Why did he antedate many of his novels in this way, and what is the relationship between their topical and, as it were, historical elements? In what sense, indeed, can Dickens be said to be a novelist of contemporary life? How retrospective is his vision, and how did his sense of the past affect his social criticism? To take a particular example: Little Dorrit is a bitter satire on the social, political, and commercial world of 1855, yet the action takes place in the period of his father's imprisonment in the

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1. Dickens World, p. 21.

Marshalsea and also reflects, in Arthur Clennam, something of the disillusionment of Dickens' middle age. How are these different elements fused in the novel, and what vision of society emerges from them?

This study is an attempt to answer questions like these, to examine the relationship between past and present in Dickens' social vision, and to suggest ways in which that vision developed as he came to understand himself and his past. It seems appropriate to begin such a study in the eighteen-forties, which saw the writing of the autobiographical fragment, Dombey and Son, and David Copperfield, and to conclude with Our Mutual Friend, his last completed novel. Not all of his work in this period is directly concerned with time and the past, and it is not suggested here that any single approach could sum up a development as complex and varied as Dickens' was in the second half of his career. Yet I believe that the source of his long quarrel with Victorian civilisation lay in the past, and that we have to follow him back into the past if we wish to see the quarrel taking shape.

CHAPTER I

SOCIAL CRITICISM AND THE DISCOVERY OF TIME: *DOMBEY AND SON* AND THE *CHRISTMAS BOOKS*

> "The spectacle of inexorable change, the triumph of time, or whatever we may call it, has always been a favourite theme for lyric and tragic poetry, and for religious meditation. To perceive universal mutation, to feel the vanity of life, has always been the beginning of seriousness. It is the condition for any beautiful, measured, or tender philosophy. Prior to that, everything is barbarous, both in morals and in poetry; for until then mankind has not learned to renounce anything; has not outgrown the instinctive egotism and optimism of the young animal, and has not removed the centre of its being, or of its faith, from the will to the imagination."
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> (George Santayana, *Three Philosophical Poets*)

I

Dombey and Son is, by common consent, the first novel of Dickens' maturity and the first in which, as Kathleen Tillotson has observed, "a pervasive uneasiness about contemporary society takes the place of an intermittent concern with specific social wrongs."[1] It is also the first novel in which we can detect a conscious interest in the idea of time, and a serious effort on Dickens' part to render the processes by which individuals develop and society changes. In this chapter I want to examine some of the evidence of his increasing involvement with contemporary social issues in the eighteen-forties, and to suggest ways in which the vision of society in Dombey and Son may be related to what I shall call Dickens' discovery of time--that heightened awareness of individual and social change which was one consequence of his deepening preoccupation with his own past during this period.

It might be said that Dombey and Son is separated from its predecessors by the coming of the railways. If Martin Chuzzlewit is the consummation of Dickens' earlier, picaresque period, then the mood of Dombey belongs unmistakably to the eighteen-forties; one can define the change by contrasting the lyrical description of the coach-ride in Chapter xxxvi of Martin Chuzzlewit, with Dombey's railroad journey to Birmingham after the death of his son. There are signs, however, that in the earlier novel Dickens was attempting

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1. Novels of the Eighteen-Forties (Oxford, 1954), p. 157.

to write a satire on contemporary life, organised around a central theme. In the Preface to the First Edition of Martin Chuzzlewit, he wrote that he had "endeavoured in the progress of this Tale, to resist the temptation of the current Monthly Number, and to keep a steadier eye upon the general purpose and design."[1] This design, in Forster's words, was "to show, more or less by every person introduced, the number and variety of humours and vices that have their root in selfishness,"[2] and it was to have a contemporary social application. Dickens wanted to preface the novel with a line from a verse Prologue he had written for Westland Marston's play, The Patrician's Daughter, in which he had championed the claims of the art that dealt with contemporary life:

> Learn from the lesson of the present day.
> Not light its import, and not poor its mien,
> Yourselves the actors, and your home the scene.[3]

Dickens was dissuaded from using the final line as a motto by Forster, who nonetheless recognised that "something much more pestiferous was now the aim of his satire," than the "Debtor's' prisons, parish Bumbledoms, Yorkshire schools" of the previous novels.[4]

But this intention was not carried through, and Martin Chuzzlewit suffers from an imbalance between the dominant comic mode and Dickens' impulse to project his satire on to a wider front.

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1. C.P., p. 294.
2. Forster, p. 291.
3. The Plays and Poems of Charles Dickens, ed. R.H. Shepherd (2 vols., 1885), II, 220.
4. Forster, pp. 311-12.

In taking Pecksniff for his focus, he reckoned without the tendency of that great comic character (Mrs. Gamp is another case in point) to transcend the moral categories of the novel. The exuberant inventiveness of Pecksniff's egoism is itself an expression of life and creativity, and it survives the sadistic thrashing he receives at the hands of old Martin. The moral scheme of the book can punish Pecksniff, but it cannot contain him. At the same time the theme of selfishness is at once too traditional and too general for Pecksniff to figure as a representative contemporary villain. Whereas Dombey's brand of commercial pride is seen at work within the context of a whole society--destroying the home, poisoning the relations between employer and employed, aligning itself with repressive educational systems which blight the lives of children--Pecksniff's "humour" is only by analogy related to the acquisitiveness and hypocrisy which Dickens is satirising in contemporary English and American society. This satire remains episodic, although there are signs in the treatment of the Anglo-Bengalee Disinterested Loan and Life Assurance Company, and in the later relationship of Tigg and Jonas Chuzzlewit, that he was attempting something more ambitious.

It is only in Dombey and Son that we become conscious of a coherent vision of society, organising and directing the particulars of Dickens' satire. In place of the linear, picaresque universe of Martin Chuzzlewit, we have in Dombey a "round world of many circles within circles," in which, Dickens asks, "do we make a weary journey from the high grade to the low, to find at last that they lie close

together, that the two extremes touch, and that our journey's end is but our starting-place?" (xxxiv, 495-96). In this sombre, more contracted world each individual has his place within the scheme of society, and society itself is seen in a process of flux and change. The sense of society as a living organism in Dombey and Son, subject to "the ceaseless work of Time" (lviii, 812), reflects a new seriousness in Dickens' thinking which we can trace in his writings during the eighteen-forties.

II

In the years between his return from the United States in 1842 and the start of David Copperfield in 1849, Dickens' creative life is marked by the dominance of two related preoccupations: a resurgence of interest in his own past, and a growing discontent with the evils of contemporary life. Both preoccupations are evident in the kinds of novel he wrote in the second half of this decade--Dombey and Son, a contemporary satire, and his first detailed attempt at fictional autobiography, David Copperfield--but they can also be seen in the series of Christmas Books he wrote between 1843 and 1848: A Christmas Carol (1843), The Chimes (1844), The Cricket on the Hearth (1845), The Battle of Life (1846), and The Haunted Man (1848).

The value of these little books lies not so much in their intrinsic literary merits (perhaps only the Carol and The Chimes

deserve to rank with the novels) as in the fact that they were written at this important stage of Dickens' development. The three which merit serious consideration--the Carol, The Chimes, and The Haunted Man--show Dickens experimenting with form, with new areas of social comment, with ideas of time and moral conversion, all of which prefigure the imaginative concerns of the later novels. Considered as a whole, the five books show a gradual progression from the social and satirical to the personal and autobiographical, from the economic selfishness of Scrooge to the introversion of Redlaw, the haunted man, brooding upon his "memory of sorrow, wrong, and trouble";[1] and in this, of course, they exemplify the pattern of Dickens' art as it evolves from Martin Chuzzlewit to David Copperfield. Moreover, there is a significant relationship between Dickens' interest in ghosts and the process of memory in his work, and the supernatural machinery of the Christmas Books should be related to this passage from Master Humphrey's Clock. Master Humphrey is sitting by his fireside at midnight:

> The popular faith in ghosts has a remarkable affinity with the whole current of our thoughts at such an hour as this, and seems to be their necessary and natural consequence. For who can wonder that man should feel a vague belief in tales of disembodied spirits wandering through those places which they once dearly affected, when he himself, scarcely less separated from his old world than they, is for ever lingering upon past emotions and bygone times, and hovering, the ghost of his former self, about the places and people that warmed his heart of old? It is thus that at this quiet hour I haunt the house where I was born, the rooms I used to tread, the scenes of my infancy, my boyhood, and my youth; it is thus that I prowl around my buried treasure (though not of gold or silver), and mourn my loss; it is

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1. C.B., p. 336.

> thus that I revisit the ashes of extinguished fires, and take my silent stand at old bedsides. If my spirit should ever glide back to this chamber when my body is mingled with the dust, it will but follow the course it often took in the old man's lifetime, and add[1] but one more change to the subjects of its contemplation.

Dickens is here speaking in the character of the old antiquarian, Master Humphrey, but these reflections--written in 1840--might well serve as a rationale for the supernatural machinery of the Christmas Books. In A Christmas Carol, the Ghost of Christmas Past initiates Scrooge's conversion by awakening his memory of past kindnesses and loyalties; by the time of The Haunted Man the supernatural element has become a mere projection of Redlaw's (and Dickens') absorption in the past. We shall see that Dickens himself was a haunted man in 1848, "for ever lingering upon past emotions and bygone times," and the interest in time and memory in the Christmas Books anticipates his more complex treatment of these themes in Dombey and Son and David Copperfield.

A Christmas Carol, the first of the genre, is perhaps the most successful and certainly the one which has survived best. It is of particular interest to the student of Dickens' development, for it reveals many of the social issues which had been engaging his attention in 1842 and 1843. He was especially concerned by the employment of children in industry, and by the opposition to Shaftesbury's reforms on the part of industrialists. In October 1842, for example, we find him outraged on reading Lord Londonderry's

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1. Clock, p. 33.

speech in the House of Lords on the Mines and Collieries Bill. Even before the new Bill came into operation, Londonderry had begun to organise a league to work for its repeal, and set about publicising the mine-owners' point of view. Dickens did not wait to be commissioned to write about it, but at once sent off a note to his old editor, John Black:

> I see that Lord Londonderry advertises a letter to Lord Ashley, on the subject of mines and collieries. If you would like to have it noticed, and will send it to me here, I shall be happy to review it.[1]

His offer was accepted, and his review was printed in the Morning Chronicle on 20 October 1842.

It has only once been reprinted, in 1934,[2] but it is one of Dickens' most direct and biting satires, in which he gives ironic praise to the pamphlet for its originality and style, and to the author for being so far in advance of the age:

> As it is one of the most charming and graceful characteristics of this remarkable production that it has no one thought, or argument, or line of reasoning, in its whole compass, but is entirely devoted to the display of its noble author's exquisite taste and extreme felicity of expression ...we may be pardoned if we make them the principal topics of our brief and insufficient homage.... It is scarcely necessary to mention that, in reference to the Mines and Collieries Bill ...everybody was wrong except the Marquess of Londonderry; because whenever there is one intellect so vastly in advance of the rest of the world as the Marquess of Londonderry's is universally felt and admitted by all men to be, this result will inevitably follow.[3]

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1. From a Catalogue of John Waller, autograph dealer, No. 111, entry 119.
2. Moses Tyson, "A Review and Other Writings by Charles Dickens," Bulletin of the John Rylands Library, XVIII (1934), 177-96.
3. Tyson, pp. 182-84.

Lord Londonderry is flayed for his insolence (or "exquisite good taste"), his insensibility (or apparent nausea at what he called the "disgusting pictorial woodcuts" in the original Report), and his elegant style--"unequalled, perhaps, save in the earliest English Exercises of the King of the Sandwich Islands, penned when he first took lodgings in the Adelphi Hotel, and began to study the language." He is finally held up to admiration as a Don Quixote, "stemming the tide of public indignation and compassionate remembrance of the wronged and suffering many, with his gray goose-quill."[1]

Throughout 1843, while Dickens was engaged in writing Martin Chuzzlewit, there are repeated signs of discontent in his social thinking--a discontent which he was unable to incorporate into the satire of his novel. On 1 February 1843 he wrote to Southwood Smith regretting his inability to take up the subject of Child Labour, on which Smith had sent him some figures: he was, he said, "fully engaged in doing my best for similar objects by different means",and besides, the topic was a large one, involving "the whole subject of the condition of the mass of people in this country.... The necessity of a mighty change, I clearly see; and yet I cannot reconcile it to myself to reduce the earnings of any family, their means of existence being so very scant and spare".[2] But Smith persisted, and in March sent Dickens a copy of the Second Report of the Children's Employment Commission.[3] This had an immediate and

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1. Tyson, pp. 188, 191.
2. N, I, 505.
3. Parliamentary Reports (1843), XIII.

startling effect: "I am so perfectly stricken down by the blue-book you have sent me, that I think ...of writing and bringing out a very cheap pamphlet called An Appeal to the People of England on behalf of the Poor Man's Child, with my name attached, of course."[1] In the event, the pamphlet had to be deferred and on 10 March Dickens wrote again to Southwood Smith:

> Don't be frightened when I tell you that, since I wrote to you last, reasons have presented themselves for deferring the production of that pamphlet till the end of the year. I am not at liberty to explain them further just now; but rest assured that when you know them, and see what I do, and where, and how, you will certainly feel that a sledge-hammer has come down with twenty times the force--twenty thousand times the force I could exert by following out my first idea. Even so recently as when I wrote to you the other day I had not contemplated the means I shall now, please God, use. But they have been suggested to me; and I have girded myself for their seizure--as you shall see in due time.[2]

The "sledge-hammer" blow was to be A Christmas Carol.

It is characteristic of Dickens that social injustice should have been brought home to him through the sufferings of children.[3]

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1. N, I, 512; letter of 6 March 1843.
2. N, I, 512.
3. There is some earlier indication of this, in his prison-visiting, in Oliver Twist, and in Little Nell's confrontation with Miss Monflathers in Chapter xxxi of The Old Curiosity Shop. We also know that he visited two cotton mills in Manchester in 1838, and wrote (29 December 1838) to Edward Fitzgerald, one of Shaftesbury's secretaries, of his concern for the factory-children: "I mean to strike the heaviest blow in my power for these unfortunate creatures, but whether I shall do so in the 'Nickleby,' or wait some other opportunity, I have not yet determined" (Edwin Hodder, The Life and Work of the seventh Earl of Shaftesbury [3 vols., 1886], I, 227). It is also known from the as yet unpublished letters of 1841 to Dickens, that Shaftesbury was then in communication with him, and anxious that he should meet the factory-inspector, Leonard Horner--whom Dickens was to mention (with Southwood Smith) in the Londonderry article.

Southwood Smith's blue-book alerted him to the conditions of children employed in industry, but it was his visit to the Saffron Hill Ragged School, a month before starting work on the Carol, which created the deeper impression. For here, in the slum-children of London, Dickens confronted a social evil that he felt was even more disturbing than anything he had read about or seen in prisons. His account of this visit in a letter to Miss Burdett-Coutts is another landmark in the history of his social conscience:

> I have very seldom seen, in all the strange and dreadful things I have seen in London and elsewhere, anything so shocking as the dire neglect of soul and body exhibited in these children. And although I know; and am as sure as it is possible for one to be of anything which has not happened, that in the prodigious misery and ignorance of the swarming masses of mankind in England, the seeds of its certain ruin are sown, I never saw that Truth so staring out in hopeless characters, as it does from the walls of this place. The children in the Jails are almost as common sights to me as my own; but these are worse, for they have not arrived there yet, but are as plainly and certainly traveling there, as they are to their graves.[1]

Dickens' response to the Saffron Hill Ragged School foreshadows several of the issues he was later to take up in Bleak House, Hard Times, and A Tale of Two Cities: the certain correlation between social misery and revolution; the futility of a narrowly sectarian approach to the education of the poor; upper-class indifference to the explosive situation on their own doorsteps. "There is a kind of delicacy which is not at all shocked by the existence of such things, but is excessively shocked to know of them; and I am afraid it will shut its eyes on Ragged Schools until the

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1. Coutts, pp. 50-51; letter of 16 September 1843. It is surely an extraordinary remark that the jail children were almost as well known to him as his own.

Ragged Scholars are perfect in their learning out of doors, when woe to whole garments."[1] Dickens had touched on these topics before; what is new in his response is the note of urgency, and as in the case of the blue-book his first impulse was journalistic. The same day he wrote to Macvey Napier, editor of the Edinburgh Review, proposing an article which would "come out strongly against any system of education based exclusively on the principles of the Established Church." In his description of the Ragged Schools and the schools in prisons he "could show these people in a state so miserable and so neglected, that their very nature rebels against the simplest religion, and that to convey to them the faintest outlines of any system of distinction between right and wrong is in itself a giant's task, before which mysteries and squabbles for forms must give way."[2]

The article was not written, but something of its message can be traced in the Christian and humanitarian framework of the Carol; for the philosophy of this Christmas book is more than a mere "philosophie de Noël," in Professor Louis Cazamian's phrase.[3] It is also an appeal to the basic Christian virtue of charity, and transcends any narrow sectarian considerations. There is no doubt that the Carol was read very much in this spirit, and that Jeffrey was speaking for a majority of contemporary readers when he told Dickens that "you have done more good by this little publication,

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1. Coutts, p. 54.
2. N, I, 540.
3. Le Roman Social en Angleterre (rev. edn. in 2 vols., Paris, 1935), I, 237.

fostered more kindly feelings, and prompted more positive acts of beneficence, than can be traced to all the pulpits and confessionals in Christendom since Christmas 1842."[1] But the influence of the Saffron Hill experience can be more clearly seen in Stave III of the Carol, when the Ghost of Christmas Present brings out two slum-children from under his robe:

> They were a boy and girl. Yellow, meagre, ragged, scowling, wolfish; but prostrate, too, in their humility....No change, no degradation, no perversion of humanity, in any grade, through all the mysteries of wonderful creation, has monsters half so horrible and dread.
>
> Scrooge started back, appalled....
>
> 'Spirit! are they yours?' Scrooge could say no more.
>
> 'They are Man's,' said the Spirit, looking down upon them. 'And they cling to me, appealing from their fathers. This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want. Beware them both, and all of their degree, but most of all beware this boy, for on his brow I see that written which is Doom, unless the writing be erased....'[2]

The slum-child reappears, "a baby savage," in The Haunted Man, and in the figure of Jo the crossing-sweeper in Bleak House.

Dickens began work on the Carol in the second week of October, but earlier in the month he delivered a speech at the Manchester Athenaeum which touched on another important theme of his book. His subject was the education of the poor, and he stressed the "inward dignity of character" which the working-man could derive from improving himself in institutions like the Athenaeum: "Though he should find it hard for a season even to keep the wolf of hunger from his door, let him but once have chased the dragon of ignorance

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1. Forster, p. 316.
2. C.B., pp. 56-7.

from his hearth, and self-respect and hope are left him." In society at large, education was the means of achieving a better understanding between different classes of men and, specifically, between employers and employed:

> The more a man who improves his leisure in such a place learns, the better, gentler, kinder man he must become. When he knows how much great minds have suffered for the truth in every age and time, and to what dismal persecutions opinion has been exposed, he will become more tolerant of other men's belief in all matters, and will incline more leniently to their sentiments when they chance to differ from his own. Understanding that the relations between himself and his employers involve a mutual duty and responsibility, he will discharge his part of the implied contract cheerfully, faithfully, and honourably; for the history of every useful life warns him to shape his course in that direction.[1]

It is possible, then, to chart accurately Dickens' social preoccupations at the time of writing A Christmas Carol: the condition of children in industry and in the city slums; the fear of revolution and the part which education could play in averting it; the need to bring home to the ruling classes the dire consequences of neglecting the social misery around them; and the desirability of establishing conditions of mutual trust between employers and employed. All these concerns can be seen to converge in the Carol, where they are given focus in the story of Scrooge's conversion; and although Scrooge may seem an unrepresentative contemporary figure when set beside Dombey or Merdle, what is significant in Dickens' conception is the attempt to relate social evils to a particular attitude of mind. Scrooge belongs recognisably

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1. Speeches, pp. 48-9.

with the misers and moneylenders of the early novels, but his greed is shown to have much wider consequences, extending beyond the sufferings of the Cratchits to the more sinister figures of Want and Ignorance, children of hard-headed indifference.

To disentangle the contemporary background of A Christmas Carol in this way may seem a violation of the essentially light-hearted atmosphere of the book, and there is a good deal of truth in Michael Slater's contention that it is The Chimes which marks the real beginning of Dickens' serious, 'topical' phase.[1] Yet the topical element is there in the Carol and it plays a part in shaping the total structure, is indeed inseparable from Dickens' conception and execution: as John Butt has pointed out, "this is the first occasion of Dickens discovering a plot sufficient to carry his message, and a plot conterminous with his message, a plot, that is to say, the whole of which bears upon his message and does not overlap it."[2] Dickens himself recognised the unity of structure and moral intention in his story: "I know I meant a good thing," he wrote to Mitton in December 1843, "and when I see the effect of such a little whole as that, on those for whom I care, I have a strong sense of the immense effect I could produce with an entire book."[3]

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1. "The Christmas Books," Dickensian, LXV (1969), 18-19.
2. "Dickens's Christmas Books," Pope, Dickens, and Others (Edinburgh, 1969), p. 137; this essay is a much fuller treatment of a subject Professor Butt had discussed in his earlier article "A Christmas Carol: Its Origin and Design," Dickensian, LI (1954), 15-18. I am indebted to Professor Butt for his excellent discussion of the part the Christmas Books play in Dickens' development, and particularly for his analysis of the contemporary relevance of the Carol.
3. N, I, 549.

Dombey and Son is the first "entire book" to show evidence of the imaginative coherence Dickens had achieved in the Carol and there are, as we shall see, several points of similarity between the two works. In one respect, however, the Carol looks forward also to David Copperfield and the fragment of autobiography Dickens was to write later in the 'forties. When the Ghost of Christmas Past takes Scrooge back to the scenes of his childhood, he shows him "a lonely boy ...reading near a feeble fire," at the sight of whom "Scrooge sat down upon a form, and wept to see his poor forgotten self as he used to be."[1] The boy has been left behind at school, and his only companions are characters in the books he has been reading--the Arabian Nights and Robinson Crusoe. These were among the works which Dickens himself had read as a child at Chatham, and we can see from his autobiography that they provided a similar consolation and companionship: "When I think of it, the picture always rises in my mind, of a summer evening, the boys at play in the churchyard, and I sitting on my bed, reading as if for life."[2] Scrooge's response to this moment from the past is very similar to what we know of Dickens' own attitude to his past, and when he feels "pity for his former self," one is reminded of David Copperfield looking back upon his childhood: "When I tread the old ground, I do not wonder what I seem to see and pity, going on before me, an innocent romantic boy, making his imaginative world out of such strange experiences and sordid things!"[3] It is a small episode in

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1. C.B., p. 27.
2. Forster, p. 6.
3. C.B., p. 28; D.C., xi, 169.

the Carol, but the autobiographical parallel is unmistakable: Dickens was thinking about his past.

The three visions provide the basic structure of A Christmas Carol, and the closing picture of the reformed Scrooge drinking punch with Bob Cratchit balances the opening scene in the counting-house. Scrooge's development from a "squeezing, wrenching, grasping, clutching, covetous, old sinner," who "carried his own low temperature always about with him,"[1] anticipates Mr. Dombey's more complex conversion from a "frozen gentleman" (v, 57) to a loving father and grandfather. In both works there is a similar play on the irony inherent in the idea of "business": Mr. Morfin attributes his insensitivity to John Carker's inner struggle to the fact that "'we go on in our clockwork routine, from day to day, and can't make out, or follow, these changes....In short, we are so d----d business-like'" (xxxiii, 477); his words echo Jacob Marley's diatribe against the incarceration of business habit:

> 'Business!' cried the Ghost, wringing its hands again. 'Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were all my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!'[2]

The pattern of conversion is also similar in the Carol and Dombey: it is seen in terms of an acknowledgement of common humanity, and a recognition that man exists in time, that he is bound to the past, and that his every action has consequences in the future, both for himself and for others. "'Assure me that I yet may change these

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1. C.B., p. 8.
2. C.B., p. 20.

shadows you have shown me,'" Scrooge cries out to the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come, "'...I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach.'"[1] So, too, at the end of Dombey and Son Mr. Dombey is left alone in the "ghostly, memory-haunted twilight" (lix, 839); he has to learn the lessons of time before he can inherit, through Florence and her children, a place in the present and the future.

III

Dickens' next Christmas Book, The Chimes, was written the following year (1844), and is much more recognisably a "tract for the times"; it was conceived as a "great blow for the poor," and was to have, in Dickens' words, "a grip upon the very throat of the time."[2] Like the Carol it is a story of conversion, but the satirical intention here is both wider and more topical. Dickens' purpose, wrote Forster, "was to try and convert Society, as he had converted Scrooge, by showing that its happiness rested on the same foundations as those of the individual, which are mercy and charity not less than justice"; and this, Forster recognised, reflected the enlarged seriousness of Dickens' social and political thinking in this period:

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1. C.B., p. 70.
2. Forster, p. 346.

> Several months before he left England I had noticed in him the habit of more gravely regarding many things before passed lightly enough; the hopelessness of any true solution of either political or social problems by the ordinary Downing-street methods had been startlingly impressed on him in Carlyle's writings; and in the parliamentary talk of that day he had come to have as little faith for the putting down of any serious evil, as in a then notorious city alderman's gabble for the putting down of suicide. The latter had stirred his indignation to the depths just before he came to Italy, and his increased opportunities of solitary reflection since had strengthened and extended it.[1]

As a satire on certain upper and middle class attitudes to the poor, The Chimes anticipates the tone, and some of the themes, of Hard Times. The influence of Carlyle is marked in both works: Hard Times was dedicated to him, and Dickens twice asked Forster to invite Carlyle to the reading of The Chimes in London on 2 December 1844.[2] Will Fern, the agricultural labourer, is a more politically conscious Stephen Blackpool, and the scene in which he confronts Sir Joseph Bowley at the New Year festivities in Bowley Hall recalls Stephen's plea for the rights of the working-man in Book II, Chapter 5 of Hard Times. The Chimes is also, although more incidentally, an attack on the social theories of the political economists, who had drawn Dickens' fire over a rather silly remark in a recent article in the Westminster Review: reviewing Horne's A New Spirit of the Age their critic had seen fit to question the domestic economy of A Christmas Carol: "The processes whereby poor men are to be enabled to earn good wages, wherewith to buy turkeys

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1. Forster, p. 347.
2. Forster, pp. 355, 356.

for themselves, does not enter into the account ...Who went without turkey and punch in order that Bob Cratchit might get them--for, unless there were turkey and punch in surplus, some one must go without--is a disagreeable reflection kept wholly out of sight."[1] We know that Dickens read this review,[2] and that he embodied his retort in the figure of Mr. Filer, the statistician, who reproaches Trotty for eating tripe: "'You snatch your tripe, my friend, out of the mouths of widows and orphans.'"[3] Filer may be seen as a crude, preliminary sketch for that more insidious political economist, Mr. Gradgrind.

There are other contemporary parallels in The Chimes. Alderman Cute is a satirical portrait of the bluff and reactionary London magistrate, Sir Peter Laurie, and the red-faced gentleman who descants upon "'the good old times, the grand old times, the great old times!'" is the final, modified version of what Dickens had originally intended to be a satire on the Young England movement, then at its height.[4] When Trotty Veck has his vision of the future and sees his daughter Meg about to drown herself and her

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1. Westminster Review, XLI (1844), 376.
2. See Forster, p. 355.
3. C.B., p. 95.
4. C.B., p. 95; Laurie's character as a man and as a magistrate is discussed by Philip Collins in Dickens and Crime, (2nd ed., 1964), pp. 183-88. For an account of Forster's excision of the "Young England gentleman" from the proofs, see Michael Slater, "Dickens (and Forster) at work on The Chimes," Dickens Studies, II (1966), 125-27. Dr. Slater has also made extensive researches into the contemporary social background of The Chimes: see his unpubl. diss. (Oxford, 1965), "The Chimes: Its Materials, Making, and Public Reception."

child, contemporary readers would have recalled the recent case of Mary Furley, who was sentenced to death on 16 April 1844 for drowning her child in an unsuccessful suicide attempt.[1]

These and other topicalities give The Chimes a more pointed contemporary reference than A Christmas Carol. The ghostly visions, in fact, are introduced at the point when Trotty has fallen asleep after reading the newspaper, and disperse when he wakes up to find the newspaper fallen on to the hearth. The paper is a record of "the crimes and violences of the people,"[2] and he is made to suffer (in his tripe-inspired visions) because he believes the pomposities of the press in condemning the people. The Chimes reveal a tragic future for each of the principal characters: sudden death for Trotty himself, poverty and suicide for Meg, a life of degradation for Richard her fiance; Will Fern is sent to prison and ultimately resorts to rick-burning, and his daughter Lillian dies a prostitute. The pessimism which these visions generate seems disproportionate, for Trotty's only sin is his confused failure to recognise that the poor have rights as well as the rich. Indeed, one senses throughout that Dickens' discontent is too wide and public to be contained within the domestic framework of a fireside tale, and that it is not Trotty who needs to be converted, but Cute, Filer, and Sir Joseph Bowley. This seems to have been Dickens' original intention, for

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1. See the Times, 17 April 1844, p. 8. Dickens had taken up Mary Furley's case earlier in the year, in his "Threatening Letter to Thomas Hood," M.P., p. 8.

2. C.B., p. 116.

in the outline he sent to Forster the story was to conclude with a scene of apocalyptic destruction, in which "a great sea rises, and this sea of Time comes sweeping down, bearing the alderman and such mudworms of the earth away to nothing, dashing them to fragments in its fury--Toby will climb a rock and hear the bells (now faded from his sight) pealing out upon the waters."[1] The "sea of Time" reappears in the final version at the moment of Trotty's conversion, when he cries out: "'I know that our inheritance is held in store for us by Time. I know there is a sea of Time to rise one day, before which all who wrong us or oppress us will be swept away like leaves. I see it, on the flow!'"[2]

The almost abandoned notion of the "sea of Time" is nonetheless significant, for it shows how Dickens was concerned to give a wider temporal context to his satire. Similarly, the futuristic visions in the first two Christmas Books can be seen as signs of a transitional phase in Dickens' imaginative concern with time. By projecting the serious implications of his subject into a future which, in the event, does not come to pass, he is able to have it both ways--to suggest the tragic possibilities which confront his characters, while at the same time resolving everything into a final mood of gaiety and good fellowship. This may reflect a tension within Dickens himself at this time, a conflict between a growing awareness of the tragic element in human life, and an unwillingness

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1. Forster, p. 352.
2. C.B., p. 151.

to desert his 'Boz' role of humourist and family entertainer. In the allegorical method of A Christmas Carol and The Chimes he found an appropriate form for fictional experiment, one which allowed him to combine serious social criticism with his increasing interest in ideas of time, memory, and character.

The next two Christmas Books, The Cricket on the Hearth (1845) and The Battle of Life (1846), are less interesting and, as K.J. Fielding has observed, "show every sign of having been written to order."[1] They lack the firm social purpose of the first two, without having the autobiographical dimension which one can discern in The Haunted Man (1848). This, the last of the series, will be discussed at the end of this chapter, but something needs to be said here about The Battle of Life, which Dickens wrote concurrently with the opening numbers of Dombey and Son. The story is set in an indeterminate historical past, "about a hundred years ago,"[2] and concerns the love of two sisters, Grace and Marion, for their father's ward, Alfred Heathfield. It is a tale of renunciation in love, in which Marion, the younger sister who is engaged to Alfred, leaves home because she has come to realise that Grace has all along been concealing a love for her fiancé. Six years later she returns to find Grace and Alfred married, as she had planned; her act of sacrifice has been justified. Steven Marcus, who has written perceptively about this period of Dickens' creative life, plausibly

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1. Charles Dickens: A Critical Introduction (revised ed., 1965), p. 102.
2. C.B., p. 241.

suggests that the events of The Battle of Life "elaborate some fantasy about Dickens's relation to his wife's two sisters, Mary and Georgina," and that the difficulties he experienced in writing at this time arose from "the opposition between his wish to write about his reawakening past and his need to keep it secret ..."[1]

One cannot be sure, and any attempt to relate The Battle of Life to Dickens' own past must be speculative. It is clear, however, that at the time of beginning Dombey and Son in the summer of 1846, Dickens was experiencing what Marcus has called "a massive return of the past."[2] On 25 July 1846, for instance, he wrote to Forster: "I have been thinking this last day or two that good Christmas characters might be grown out of the idea of a man imprisoned for ten or fifteen years: his imprisonment being the gap between the people and circumstances of the first part and the altered people and circumstances of the second, and his own changed mind."[3] This indicates that Dickens had been thinking about the discontinuity between memory and reality--a theme which recurs in the "Memoranda Book" of 1855, in Little Dorrit, and of course in A Tale of Two Cities. A few weeks later he wrote again to Forster:

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1. Dickens: from Pickwick to Dombey (1965), pp. 288-89; Marcus argues that Marion was modelled on Dickens' beloved sister-in-law, Mary Hogarth, who lived in his home from the time of his marriage until her tragic death at the age of seventeen on 7 May 1837, and that Grace was modelled on Georgina, who devoted herself to him before and after the break-up of his marriage. Grace is four years older than Marion, and Marcus suggests that Dickens put Georgina in the place actually occupied by his wife: Kate was four years older than Mary (pp. 289-92).
2. Dickens: from Pickwick to Dombey, p. 283.
3. Forster, p. 422.

"I have been dimly conceiving a very ghostly and wild idea, which I suppose I must now reserve for the next Christmas book."[1] The idea matured into The Haunted Man which, as we shall see, has an autobiographical basis. But the chief evidence of an upheaval from the past at this time is the fragment of Dickens' autobiography which recounts his childhood experience in the blacking factory, and it is likely that this too was conceived before writing Dombey and Son. One day "in the March or April of 1847," Forster says, he told Dickens that he had met his father's friend, Charles Wentworth Dilke, who recalled having met Dickens as a child "in a warehouse near the Strand; at which place Mr. Dilke, being with the elder Dickens one day, had noticed him, and received, in return for the gift of a half-crown, a very low bow."[2] Forster realised that he had touched a painful place in Dickens' memory, and "very shortly afterwards, I learnt in all their detail the incidents that had been so painful to him, and what then was said to me or written respecting them revealed the story of his boyhood."[3]

Forster's dating of this incident is contradictory, and I am inclined to agree with Edgar Johnson that it occurred sometime between September 1845 and May 1846, when Forster and Dickens would have come into contact with Dilke over the Daily News project.[4]

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1. Forster, pp. 422-23.
2. Forster, p. 23.
3. Forster, p. 23.
4. Johnson, I, 45, note 63. Forster gives three dates for the writing of the autobiographical fragment: on p. 23 he says it was written in 1847, and on p. 24 that it "had all been written, as fact, before he thought of any other use for it; and it was

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The autobiographical fragment itself was probably written rather later. "Shall I leave you my life in MS when I die?" Dickens wrote to Forster on 4 November 1846, "There are some things in it that would touch you very much ..."[1] It is not clear from this whether Dickens had begun to write his autobiography in November 1846, or merely meant to do so, but what is clear beyond question is that at the time of writing Dombey and Son, and probably before, Dickens was thinking seriously about his past. In the same letter he writes that "Mrs. Pipchin's establishment....is from the life, and I was there--I don't suppose I was eight years old; but I remember it all as well, and certainly understood it as well, as I do now. We should be devilish sharp in what we do to children."[2] The original of Mrs. Pipchin was the "reduced old lady" with whom Dickens went to stay when his family moved in to the Marshalsea to join his father.[3]

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not until several months later, when the fancy of David Copperfield, itself suggested by what he had so written of his early troubles, began to take shape in his mind, that he abandoned his first intention of writing his own life." But Copperfield was conceived in the spring of 1849, and later in the same chapter he says that the episode of his father's prison petition was incorporated in the novel "three or four years after it was written" in the autobiography (p. 32).

1. Forster, p. 479.
2. Forster, p. 479.
3. Mrs. Elizabeth Roylance was an old lady "who took children in to board, and had once done so at Brighton; and who, with a few alterations and embellishments, unconsciously began to sit for Mrs. Pipchin in Dombey when she took in me" (Forster, p. 27). In creating Mrs. Pipchin Dickens may also have had in mind his experiences at the Chatham dame-school: see "Our School," H.W., IV, 11 October 1851, 49; R.P., p. 375.

What is the significance of this upsurge of interest in his past, coming at a time when, as we have seen, Dickens was thinking more seriously than ever before about the problems of contemporary society? It is possible to say, I think, that in the mid eighteen-forties Dickens went through a period of personal crisis similar to that which, ten years later, can be discerned in Little Dorrit. There is evidence that in 1844 he was experiencing religious doubts, or as Forster put it in his somewhat euphemistic account, he did not escape "those trying regions of reflection which most men of thought, and all men of genius have at some time to pass through";[1] and it may be that the increasing restlessness which characterises the surface movement of his life in these years (as it does, once again, at the time of Little Dorrit) is symptomatic of a deeper, personal confusion. As Dickens grew older, and the first youthful energies of his career were spent, he was forced to take stock of himself and of the sources of his inspiration. And it was inevitable that this process of self-examination should have involved a reconsideration of his relationship to the past. "The quest for a clarification of the self," Professor Meyerhoff has written, "leads to a recherche du temps perdu. And the more

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1. Forster, p. 350. That these doubts were bound up with his memories of the past can be seen in a letter Dickens wrote to Forster from Genoa on 30 September 1844, describing a dream in which Mary Hogarth had returned to him in the shape of a spirit. "'What is the True religion?'" he had cried out to her: "...'perhaps the Roman Catholic is the best? perhaps it makes one think of God oftener, and believe in him more steadily?' 'For you,' said the Spirit, full of such heavenly tenderness for me, that I felt as if my heart would break; 'for you, it is the best!' Then I awoke, with the tears running down my face, and myself in exactly the condition of the dream." (Forster, p. 349).

seriously human beings become engaged in this quest, the more they become preoccupied and concerned with the consciousness of time and its meaning for humanlife."[1]

Dombey and Son is not, of course, an autobiographical novel in the sense that David Copperfield is; the point to be made is that they were both written out of the field of force created by Dickens' awakening interest in his past. One can see this, I think, in the greatly increased sophistication of his treatment of childhood in the two novels. Oliver Twist and Little Nell had been merely objects of pathos, symbols of suffering childhood in an adult world; Paul Dombey and David Copperfield are both characters in their own right, and much of the action in which they participate is seen from their point of view. In both works there is a quality of inwardness in the treatment of the child's perspective, which clearly owes a good deal to Dickens' preoccupation with his own childhood. But Dombey and Son reveals another, more far-reaching aspect of his "recherche du temps perdu" in the eighteen-forties. To reflect seriously on the past is to discover how human beings change in time, and how society itself exists in a context of perpetual change and mutation; and this perception of change, as Santayana observed, "has always been the beginning of seriousness."[2] I would suggest that the new "seriousness" which we find in Dombey and Son is the product of Dickens' discovery of time, his imaginative

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1. Time in Literature (California, 1955), p. 2.
2. Three Philosophical Poets (Harvard, 1910), p. 24.

apprehension of the idea of individual and social change. The related concepts of time and change are central to Dombey and Son, and it is to Dickens' treatment of these concepts that we must now turn.

IV

Dickens' interest in time is declared on the first page of the novel, with the introduction of Mr. Dombey at the birth of his son:

> On the brow of Dombey, Time and his brother Care had set some marks, as on a tree that was to come down in good time--remorseless twins they are for striding through their human forests, notching as they go--while the countenance of Son was crossed and recrossed with a thousand little creases, which the same deceitful Time would take delight in smoothing out and wearing away with the flat part of his scythe, as a preparation of the surface for his deeper operations. (i,1)

Time is a felt presence in the novel, contributing a relentless rhythm to the events of the action: Paul grows up and dies "beneath the watchful and attentive eyes of Time" (viii, 89), and it is "the ceaseless work of Time" as "the tides of human chance and change ... set in their allotted courses" (lviii, 812), which eventually brings about the downfall of Mr. Dombey. The chief attribute of Time is change, and the world of Dombey and Son is one in which, as Mrs. Chick reminds us, "'we must expect change'":

> 'Of weather?' asked Miss Tox, in her simplicity.
> 'Of everything,' returned Mrs. Chick. 'Of course we must. It's a world of change. Any one would surprise me very much, Lucretia, and would greatly alter my opinion of their understanding, if they attempted to contradict or evade what is

> so perfectly evident. Change!' exclaimed Mrs. Chick, with severe philosophy. 'Why, my gracious me, what is there that does not change!' (xxix, 410)

Mrs. Chick's "world of change" is revealed under many aspects. There are, firstly, the great primary changes of human life--the births, marriages, and deaths which punctuate the action and contribute a natural rhythm to the events of the novel. Related to these is the concept of "Nature" in Dombey and Son, the process of natural growth and change (particularly the growth and development of children) which Dombey and men like him attempt to deny. Then there is the spectacle of social change, embodied in the new railroad which is transforming the landscape of England and radically altering the patterns of national life. And finally there is the moral change dramatised in the character of Mr. Dombey himself. Through the different meanings of change in the novel, and the different responses the characters make to the experience of change, Dickens presents a complex picture of a society undergoing the process of evolution.[1]

Dombey and Son is the first of Dickens' novels to show what he was later to call the "impress from the moving age,"[2] and there is no better evidence of his sensitivity to emergent features of his society than the treatment of the railroad in this novel. The first description of Staggs's Gardens under the assault of the new railway is a masterpiece of sociological observation:

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1. In Chapter VIII of Dickens: from Pickwick to Dombey, Steven Marcus approaches the question of change in Dombey and Son from a different perspective.
2. B.H., xii, 160.

> Everywhere were bridges that led nowhere; thoroughfares that were wholly impassable; Babel towers of chimneys, wanting half their height; temporary wooden houses and enclosures, in the most unlikely situations; carcases of ragged tenements, and fragments of unfinished walls and arches, and piles of scaffolding, and wildernesses of bricks, and giant forms of cranes, and tripods straddling above nothing. There were a hundred thousand shapes and substances of incompleteness, wildly mingled out of their places, upside down, burrowing in the earth, aspiring in the air, mouldering in the water, and unintelligible as any dream. Hot springs and fiery eruptions, the usual attendants upon earthquakes, lent their contributions of confusion to the scene. Boiling water hissed and heaved within dilapidated walls; whence, also, the glare and roar of flames came issuing forth; and mounds of ashes blocked up rights of way, and wholly changed the law and custom of the neighbourhood.
>
> In short, the yet unfinished and unopened Railroad was in progress; and, from the very core of all this dire disorder, trailed smoothly away, upon its mighty course of civilisation and improvement. (vi, 62-3)

Dickens takes a characteristic delight in the disorder of Staggs's Gardens, the "hundred thousand shapes and substances of incompleteness," but his response to these stirrings of the railway age is fundamentally optimistic. He sees the railroad as an agent of beneficent change, initiating a "mighty course of civilisation and improvement." And as Dr. Leavis has noted, "the beneficence that he acclaims manifests itself in terms of immediate human betterment."[1] The strength and vitality, the human warmth, of the Toodle family is directly associated with Mr. Toodle's employment on the railway, which has contributed its own imagery to the language of family life: "'If you find yourselves in cuttings or in tunnels, don't you play no secret games. Keep your whistles going, and let's know where you are'" (xxxviii, 534). It is Dickens' acute sense of

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1. "Dombey and Son," Sewanee Review, LXX (1962), 190.

the human implications of this changing world that is the most impressive feature in his response, the awareness that the railroad is transforming not only the surface of society, but its very way of life. The completed Euston terminus obliterates Staggs's Gardens, but in its place a whole new culture, a railway culture, has sprung up:

> There were railway patterns in its drapers' shops, and railway journals in the windows of its newsmen. There were railway hotels, office-houses, lodging-houses, boarding-houses; railway plans, maps, views, wrappers, bottles, sandwich-boxes, and timetables; railway hackney-coach and cabstands; railway omnibuses, railway streets and buildings, railway hangers-on and parasites, and flatterers out of all calculation. There was even railway time observed in clocks, as if the sun itself had given in....
>
> To and from the heart of this great change, all day and night, throbbing currents rushed and returned incessantly like its life's blood. Crowds of people and mountains of goods, departing and arriving scores upon scores of times in every four-and-twenty hours, produced a fermentation in the place that was always in action.... (xv, 218)

It is necessary to stress the element of affirmation in Dickens' record of this social upheaval, because it is sometimes assumed that his pessimism about Mr. Dombey colours his attitude to the new railways.[1] In fact Dickens is careful to differentiate these two areas of contemporary society: the railroad is seen as a "great change," a symbol of promise and needed social improvement, whereas Mr. Dombey figures throughout the novel as the enemy of change. The distinction is made quite explicit in Chapter xx, when Dombey responds with sullen introspection to the railroad which

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1. As Kathleen Tillotson does, for instance, in Novels of the Eighteen-Forties, pp. 200-01. For a good discussion of Dickens' open-mindedness in this novel see John Lucas, "Dickens and Dombey and Son: Past and Present Imperfect," in Tradition and Tolerance in Nineteenth-Century Fiction, ed. David Howard, John Lucas, John Goode (1966), pp. 99-140.

takes him to Birmingham after the death of his son, "tinging the scene of transition before him with the morbid colours of his own mind, and making it a ruin and a picture of decay, instead of hopeful change, and promise of better things ...(xx, 282). The railroad is a touchstone in the novel, and Dombey's negative reaction to it helps to define the position he occupies in Dickens' vision of contemporary society.

Who is Mr. Dombey, and what is the nature and contemporary relevance of his business? In one sense, of course, he can be seen as an updated version of Scrooge. Both men embody that concentration of individual energy "within the narrow sphere of the individual's money-getting pursuits" which Mill recognised as one of the moral effects of a "high state of civilisation";[1] but whereas Scrooge had operated on the periphery of society, Dombey exists at the centre of the contemporary world. In Dombey and Son economic pride has become respectable, not to say genteel:

> 'But his deportment, my dear Louisa!' said Miss Tox. 'His presence! His dignity! No portrait that I have ever seen of any one has been half so replete with those qualities. Something so stately, you know: so uncompromising: so very wide across the chest: so upright! A pecuniary Duke of York, my love, and nothing short of it!' said Miss Tox. 'That's what I should designate him.' (i, 8-9)

Miss Tox's ecstatic admiration may recall the contemporary lionising of George Hudson, the Railway King, who had his heyday in 1846.[2] Hudson was one of the financial backers of The Daily News, but there is no sign that Dickens had him in mind when creating Dombey. In

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1. "Civilisation," Westminster Review, XXV (1836), 11.
2. See R.S. Lambert, The Railway King (1934), pp. 171-94.

fact, when set against Hudson--or against the fictional Carson, the mill-owner in Mrs. Gaskell's Mary Barton (1848)--Dombey appears a traditional figure, and it is clear that Dickens intended him to be so. He belongs to an aristocratic line of merchant princes, with a "House" in the City and an established trade in the time-honoured markets of the West Indies and the East. The economic pioneers of the eighteen-forties were the new generation of merchants and industrialists in the north; Dombey represents the City aristocracy which was then coming into social power and political influence.[1]

In Dombey and Son London is the trading centre of the world, and it is the global scope of Dombey's enterprises that Dickens' emphasises: "The earth was made for Dombey and Son to trade in, and the sun and moon were made to give them light. Rivers and seas were formed to float their ships; rainbows gave them promise of fair weather; winds blew for or against their enterprises; stars and planets circled in their orbits, to preserve inviolate a system of which they were the centre" (i, 2). One becomes conscious in this novel, as scarcely before in Dickens, of being at the heart of an Empire: in the vicinity of Dombey's offices "there might be seen pictures of ships speeding away full sail to all parts of the world; outfitting warehouses ready to pack off anybody anywhere, fully equipped in half an hour ..." (iv, 32). Walter Gay is shipped off to Barbados; Major Bagstock, with his Indian servant and appetite

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1. For a useful discussion of Victorian men of business see S.G. Checkland, The Rise of Industrial Society in England 1815-1885 (1964), pp. 103-76.

for spiced foods, capitalises on the respectability of his colonial experience to gain an entry into Dombey's society; Master Bitherstone comforts himself under the rigours of Mrs. Pipchin's regime by planning "an overland return to India" (xi, 137). The book has a large geographical reach, but at the same time shows a world circumscribed and dominated by trade, where commerce and imperialism go hand in hand. The name of Dombey, we learn from Major Bagstock, "'is known and honoured in the British possessions abroad'" (x, 126).

I have suggested earlier in this chapter that the structure of Dombey and Son reflects Dickens' consciousness that society is a "round world of many circles within circles"; at the centre of this world is Dombey, a representative contemporary figure who embodies the hardening features of an established but increasingly influential commercial middle class. And just as Dombey's trade radiates outwards from the counting-house to "the British possessions abroad," so too the attitude of mind he represents is shown in centrifugal operation throughout society--emanating from the home and the business to cast its shade over English life. His deadening respectability (mirrored in the "tall, dark, dreadfully genteel street" [iii, 21] where he lives) aligns itself instinctively with the moribund elements in contemporary society: the faded gentility of Mrs. Pipchin, burnt-out colonials like Bagstock, the lower rungs of the aristocracy, the repressive educational theories of men like Dr. Blimber. The shrunken world of Dombey's trade is reflected in the globes in Dr. Blimber's study, which "stand still in their accustomed places, as if the world were stationary too, and

nothing in it ever perished in obedience to the universal law, that, while it keeps it on the roll, calls everything to earth" (xii, 578).

We are now in a position to understand how Dickens' discovery of time, the profound sense of change which informs Dombey and Son, reinforced and extended his criticism of contemporary life. This novel is the first expression of Dickens' mature analysis of the world in which he was living, a world where injustice and inhumanity are seen to be fostered not simply--as in the early novels--by the evil actions of individual men, but by what Dr. Leavis has called in his essay on Hard Times "the aggressive formulation of an inhumane spirit."[1] Dombey is not an obvious villain; he has a certain dignity and moral rectitude, but he stands for an "inhumane spirit" which is fundamentally hostile to the life of instinct and natural feeling. The characteristic form which this hostility takes is that of opposition to the processes of organic change, whether these are revealed in the natural growth and development of children, in the "hopeful change" of the new railroad, or in the larger rhythms of death and eternity symbolised by the sea. For change is the chief attribute of Nature in this novel, and Dombey's philosophy is shown to be unnatural when it attempts to arrest and control the unconscious flow of life: "'Dombey and Son know neither time, nor place, nor season,'" says Carker, "'but bear them all down'" (xxxvii, 526), and for Dr. Blimber, bent on imposing a pattern of

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1. The Great Tradition (1948), p. 228.

false change upon his pupils, "Nature was of no consequence at all" (xi, 141).

At the heart of Dombey and Son, then, there is a conflict between the evolutionary process of Nature, the slow erosion and creation of time, and the mechanistic philosophy of Dombey, epitomised in his loud ticking watch and the insistent measurements of Dr. Blimber's clock. Each of the principal characters is defined by his or her attitude to time: for Dombey time is clock-time, enforcing punctuality and the successful fulfillment of business, whereas Captain Cuttle's warm heart is symbolised by the erratic operation of his precious watch: "'Put it back half an hour every morning, and about another quarter towards the arternoon, and it's a watch that'll do you credit'" (xix, 269). His friend Sol Gills is bewildered by the rush of change around him, and in the face of "'competition, competition--new invention, new invention--alteration, alteration'" (iv, 38) has become old-fashioned. Paul Dombey is "old-fashioned" in a different sense: his attraction to the timeless mysteries of the sea identifies him with "the old, old fashion--Death!" (xvi, 226).

V

The full force of Dombey's violation of Nature is revealed in his treatment of his wife and children. The novel opens with a birth and a death, and it is part of the irony of Dickens'

conception that Dombey, whose wife is purely incidental to his scheme of parental destiny, should be powerless to supply the lack which her dying creates. "'Nature must be called upon to make a vigorous effort in this instance,'" (i, 5), Dr. Parker Peps advises, but Mrs. Dombey has already ebbed below any possibility of recall by "effort," and the first chapter ends with her drifting out "upon the dark and unknown sea that rolls round all the world" (i, 10). Her death necessitates the employment of a wet-nurse, a process which Dombey resists even while recognising its inevitability. "'Couldn't something temporary be done with a teapot'" (ii, 12), Mr. Chick suggests. His characteristic tactlessness illustrates Dombey's dilemma: he needs the fertile, full-blooded "Nature" which someone like Polly Toddle can provide, but only on conditions which will severely limit its operation:

> 'It is not at all in this bargain that you need become attached to my child, or that my child need become attached to you. I don't expect or desire anything of the kind. Quite the reverse. When you go away from here, you will have concluded what is a mere matter of bargain and sale, hiring and letting: and will stay away. The child will cease to remember you; and you will cease, if you please, to remember the child.' (ii, 16)

Polly Toodle brings into Dombey's household the warmth and tenderness of maternal care, qualities which are associated, in Dickens' scheme, with the lower orders and with the life-giving energies of the new railroad. But Paul's environment is a sterile one, and when Polly is dismissed the child's growth becomes a slow and painful struggle in which the needs of Nature are continually thwarted. Dickens expresses the unnaturalness of his rearing in

imagery of ice and cold: Paul's christening becomes a kind of funeral, its chill striking home "to some sensitive part of his nature, which could not recover itself in the cold shade of his father" (viii, 89-90). The "icy current" of his father's nature surrounds the child from birth, and "instead of being released by this influence, and running clear and free, had thawed for but an instant to admit its burden, and then frozen with it into one unyielding block" (v, 47). Even the well-meaning Miss Tox "froze its young blood with airs upon the harpsichord" (vii, 87). This imagery of cold and desolation culminates in his arrival at Dr. Blimber's Academy when, "with an aching void in his young heart, and all outside so cold, and bare, and strange, Paul sat as if he had taken life unfurnished, and the upholsterer were never coming" (xi, 150).

In Dombey and Son, as in Hard Times, the life-denying ethic of a narrow materialism reaches out from the home to the school, and nothing is more indicative of Dickens' firm hold on his subject than the way in which the educational satire is interwoven with the chief interests of the novel. Mrs. Pipchin and Dr. Blimber attract parents for whom respectability and the pride of money and class are more important than their children's needs, and their systems reinforce the unnatural processes at work in the home. Paul is sent down to Brighton for the sea air, but Mrs. Pipchin's boarding-house is just as cold and daunting as his father's mansion: it was situated "in a steep by-street at Brighton; where the soil was more than usually chalky, flinty, and sterile, and the houses were more

than usually brittle and thin ..." (viii, 99). The unwelcoming interior of Mrs. Pipchin's house, abounding in cacti and spiders, suggests the unnatural violence of her "system," which was "not to encourage a child's mind to develop and expand itself like a young flower, but to open it by force like an oyster" (viii, 102).

The violation of childhood is continued in Dr. Blimber's Academy. Paul is only six when he goes there, and his youth and physical frailty earn him a certain exemption from the rigours of the system, which are visited heavily on the older, more robust children. In Blimber, as Professor Collins has shown, "Dickens was attacking an educational vice more common and more insidious than such a manifest scandal as the Yorkshire schools."[1] Here the alliance between contemporary materialism and educational theory is made quite explicit: high fees and hard learning go together, and the snobbery of the parents is epitomised in the absurd figure of Sir Barnet Skettles, who after introducing Paul to his son as "'a young gentleman you ought to know....a young gentleman you <u>may</u> know, Barnet'" (xiv, 198), goes off to talk economics with the dancing-master. Blimber's parents get value for their money, and Blimber himself is very far from being an incompetent brute like Squeers and Creakle; it is, rather, the thoroughness of his system that Dickens criticises, the imbalance created by a single-minded insistence on abstruse facts and the mechanics of learning. For Blimber, like Dombey, is the enemy of Nature and change; he usurps

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1. <u>Dickens and Education</u> (1964), p. 141.

the natural process of growth by imposing adult expectations on his charges, regarding them "as if they were all Doctors, and were born grown up" (xii, 165). His school is "a great hothouse, in which there was a forcing apparatus incessantly at work":

> All the boys blew before their time. Mental green-peas were produced at Christmas, and intellectual asparagus all the year round. Mathematical gooseberries (very sour ones too) were common at untimely seasons, and from mere sprouts of bushes, under Doctor Blimber's cultivation. Every description of Greek and Latin vegetable was got off the driest twigs of boys, under the frostiest circumstances. Nature was of no consequence at all. No matter what a young gentleman was intended to bear, Doctor Blimber made him bear to pattern, somehow or other. (xi, 141)

The consequence of the "forcing system" is that the child's capacity for change is permanently impaired. Nature takes a savage revenge on the Doctor's attempt to turn boys into "young gentleman," and the monument to his system is the painfully immature Toots, who "suddenly left off blowing one day, and remained in the establishment a mere stalk. And people did say that the Doctor had rather overdone it with young Toots, and that when he began to have whiskers he left off having brains" (xi, 141-42).

"Nature was of no consequence at all": the language of Dickens' educational satire relates the Brighton episode to the early chapters and to the action which follows on the death of Paul. It is at Brighton that Mr. Dombey meets his Mephistopheles, Major Bagstock, who is to be the architect of his fateful second marriage. Bagstock, too, is the product of hothouse forcing--"'the time was, when he was forced, Ma'am, into such full blow, by high hothouse heat in the West Indies, that he was known as the Flower'" (xxvi, 367)--and it is through him that Dombey comes into contact with the

quasi-aristocratic world of Mrs. Skewton and Edith Granger, a world which exhibits the corruption of Nature in a particularly complex and interesting form. Here is Dickens' account of their meeting at Leamington:

> 'Mr. Dombey is devoted to Nature, I trust?' said Mrs. Skewton, settling her diamond brooch....
> 'My friend Dombey, Ma'am,' returned the Major, 'may be devoted to her in secret, but a man who is paramount in the greatest city in the universe--'
> 'No one can be a stranger,' said Mrs. Skewton, 'to Mr. Dombey's immense influence.'
> As Mr. Dombey acknowledged the compliment with a bend of his head, the younger lady glancing at him, met his eyes.
> 'You reside here, Madam?' said Mr. Dombey, addressing her.
> 'No, we have been to a great many places. To Harrogate and Scarborough, and into Devonshire. We have been visiting, and resting here and there. Mama likes change.'
> 'Edith of course does not,' said Mrs. Skewton, with a ghastly archness.
> 'I have not found that there is any change in such places,' was the answer, delivered with supreme indifference.
> 'They libel me. There is only one change, Mr. Dombey,' observed Mrs. Skewton, with a mincing sigh, 'for which I really care, and that I fear I shall never be permitted to enjoy. People cannot spare one. But seclusion and contemplation are my what-his-name--'
> If you mean Paradise, Mama, you had better say so, to render yourself intelligible,' said the younger lady.
>
> 'My dearest Edith,' returned Mrs. Skewton, 'you know that I am wholly dependent upon you for those odious names. I assure you, Mr. Dombey, Nature intended me for an Arcadian, I am thrown away in society. Cows are my passion. What I have ever sighed for, has been to retreat to a Swiss farm, and live entirely surrounded by cows--and china.'
> (xxi, 288-89)

Many of the principal themes of the novel emerge in this passage. Dickens plays with masterly dramatic irony on the different conceptions of "change" and "Nature"--the change which is no change of the fashionable watering-place, the contrived simplicity of Mrs. Skewton, whose front of innocent youthfulness betrays a

tenacious resistance to the fact of natural change. Her conversation, with its abundant references to the "'poetry of existence'" (xxvii, 384) and the degeneracy of modern life, is a grotesque perversion of the more serious preoccupations of the novel, and Dombey responds to it with stiff gallantry. This cult of sensibility recommends itself to his sense of propriety, whereas he is merely embarrassed by the expression of true feeling in his daughter. "'She impresses me as being perfectly genteel'" (xxi, 290), he remarks after their meeting.

In Mrs. Skewton Dickens is satirising something more than the fashionable mediaevalism of the Young England movement, although there is clearly a link here with the rejected "Young England gentleman" of The Chimes. His larger point is that her regret for a more traditional past is only another symptom of the contemporary malaise, and that the rising City aristocracy are susceptible to this attitude of easy nostalgia on the part of the old order. Dickens, himself one of the chief inheritors of the English Romantic movement, knew very well that there was an element in Romanticism--the cult of the historical past--which men like Dombey would find "genteel." In terms of the social realities of the novel, Dombey's relations with Mrs. Skewton and Edith Granger define further his inability to receive any vital "impress from the moving age."

Mrs. Skewton's speech is a decorous display of Romantic sentiment, a distorting mirror in which we can see Dickens' own preoccupation with the ideas of Romanticism in Dombey and Son:

> 'You are fond of music, Mr. Dombey?'
> 'Eminently so,' was Mr. Dombey's answer.
> 'Yes. It's very nice,' said Cleopatra, looking at her cards. 'So much heart in it--undeveloped recollections of a previous state of existence--and all that--which is so truly charming. Do you know,' simpered Cleopatra, reversing the knave of clubs, who had come into her game with his heels uppermost, 'that if anything could tempt me to put a period to my life, it would be curiosity to find out what it's all about, and what it means; there are so many provoking mysteries, really, that are hidden from us. Major, you to play.' (xxi, 296)

Cleopatra is of course referring to Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood." The poem is invoked in the context of a card game, and the irony falls not on Wordsworth but on Cleopatra's glib use of his ideas. As so often in Dickens, the comic treatment of a theme indicates the depth at which it is exercising his imagination. For Dombey and Son is a work very much concerned with the "provoking mysteries" of death and the after-life. Cleopatra comes to Brighton to die, but the waves have no message for her, and "while Florence, sleeping in another chamber, dreams lovingly, in the midst of the old scenes, and their old associations live again, the figure which in grim reality is substituted for the patient boy's on the same theatre, once more to connect it--but how differently!--with decay and death, is stretched there, wakeful and complaining" (xli, 583). They wheel her out to the sea, and "she lies and listens to it by the hour; but its speech is dark and gloomy to her, and a dread is on her face, and when her eyes wander over the expanse, they see but a broad stretch of desolation between earth and heaven" (xli, 584). Resentful of change to the last, Cleopatra dies without knowing any intimations of immortality; these are revealed only to those, like

Florence, who can accept death as part of the mysterious workings of Nature:

> But there was one thought, scarcely shaped out to herself, yet fervent and strong within her, that upheld Florence when she strove, and filled her true young heart, so sorely tried, with constancy of purpose. Into her mind, as into all others contending with the great affliction of our mortal nature, there had stolen wonderings and hopes, arising in the dim world beyond the present life, and murmuring, like faint music, of recognition in the far-off land between her brother and her mother: of some present consciousness in both of her: some love and commiseration for her: and some knowledge of her as she went her way upon the earth. (xxiii, 321-22)

Death in Dombey and Son is the ultimate change, and Dickens invests it with a distinctly religious significance. For Florence there is "recognition in the far-off land between her brother and her mother," and when Alice Marwood dies Harriet Carker reads to her from the Bible--"the eternal book for all the weary and the heavy-laden; for all the wretched, fallen, and neglected of this earth ..." (lviii, 826). It is characteristic of the strong social basis of Dickens' Christianity that the New Testament should be invoked at the deathbed of this "fallen woman"; in the other death-scenes the religious feeling is much less specifically Christian. Hillis Miller has spoken of an "authentic religious motif in the novel, the apprehension of a transcendent spirit, present in nature and reached through death, but apparently unattainable in this world."[1] This "transcendent spirit" is closer to the pantheism of Wordsworth than to the New Testament. When the first Mrs. Dombey dies she drifts "out upon the dark and unknown sea that rolls round

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1. Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels (Harvard, 1958), p. 148.

all the world" (i, 10), and by the time of Paul's death the sea has come to symbolise the innermost mysteries of Nature and death; it is the source of all life, rather in the manner of the "Immortality Ode":

> Our Souls have sight of that immortal sea
> Which brought us hither ...[1]

VI

Dombey's downfall begins with the collapse of his second marriage, which brings to a sharp focus the theme of Nature in the novel. "Was Mr. Dombey's master-vice, that ruled him so inexorably," Dickens asks, "an unnatural characteristic? It might be worth while sometimes, to inquire what Nature is, and how men work to change her, and whether, in the enforced distortions so produced, it is not natural to be unnatural" (xlvii, 646). The answer he gives to the question of what Nature is ranges beyond the unnatural character of Dombey's pride to a consideration of "the eternal laws of outraged Nature" manifest in society at large:

> Alas! are there so few things in the world, about us, most unnatural, and yet most natural in being so? Hear the magistrate or judge admonish the unnatural outcasts of society; unnatural in brutal habits, unnatural in want of decency, unnatural in losing and confounding all distinctions between good and evil; unnatural in ignorance, in vice, in recklessness, in contumacy, in mind, in looks, in everything. But follow the good clergyman or doctor, who, with his life imperilled at every breath he draws, goes down into their dens, lying within the echoes of our carriage wheels and daily tread upon the pavement stones. Look round upon

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1. Lines 167-68.

> the world of odious sights ...Breathe the polluted air, foul with every impurity that is poisonous to health and life ...Vainly attempt to think of any simple plant, or flower, or wholesome weed, that, set in this foetid bed, could have its natural growth, or put its little leaves off to the sun as GOD designed it. And then, calling up some ghastly child, with stunted form and wicked face, hold forth on its unnatural sinfulness, and lament its being, so early, far away from Heaven--but think a little of its having been conceived, and born and bred, in Hell!...Unnatural humanity! When we shall gather grapes from thorns, and figs from thistles; when fields of grain shall spring up from the offal in the bye-ways of our wicked cities, and roses bloom in the fat churchyards that they cherish; then we may look for natural humanity and find it growing from such seed. (xlvii, 647-48)

This passionate outburst connects the slum-children of the Christmas Books with Jo in Bleak House, and it anticipates Dickens' later concern with public health in Household Words and the Household Narrative.[1] It is, of course, something of a digression in Dombey and Son, a work not otherwise concerned with sanitary reform, but the passage is of interest because it shows Dickens attempting to give a wider context to his satire, to connect the evils of middle class life with the "unnatural outcasts of humanity." In the event, the connexion cannot be sustained within the domestic framework of the novel, but Dickens was to return to it again. In The Haunted Man he relates the unnatural condition of Redlaw, the famous chemist who has lost his memory of past wrong, to the condition of the savage slum-child: "'All within this desolate creature is barren wilderness. All within the man bereft of what you have resigned, is the same

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1. The relevance of the public health issue to Bleak House is discussed in a forthcoming article by K.J. Fielding and A.W. Brice, "Bleak House and the Graveyard," in Dickens the Craftsman: The Strategies of Presentation, ed. Robert B. Partlow, Jr., to be published in 1970 by the University Press of Southern Illinois.

barren wilderness....He is the growth of man's indifference; you are the growth of man's presumption.'"[1] It is only in Bleak House that man's presumption and the objects of man's indifference are brought into significant relationship, where the form of the action provides an answer to the question: "What connexion can there be, between the place in Lincolnshire, the house in town, the Mercury in powder, and the whereabout of Jo the outlaw with the broom ...?"[2]

Dombey and Son ends where The Haunted Man begins, with the central figure brooding upon the past. As Dombey sits alone in "the ghostly, memory-haunted twilight," he reflects upon the ironies of change and the consolation he has lost in the unchanged goodness of his daughter:

> He thought of her as she had been, in all the home-events of the abandoned House. He thought, now, that of all around him, she alone had never changed. His boy had faded into dust, his proud wife had sunk into a polluted creature, his flatterer and friend had been transformed into the worst of villains, his riches had melted away, the very walls that sheltered him looked on him as a stranger; she alone had turned the same mild gentle look upon him always....She had never changed to him--nor had he ever changed to her--and she was lost. (lix, 839)

This scene is prepared for in the refrain that runs through the book, "Let him remember it in that room, years to come!" Dombey's crisis is movingly rendered, and it comes with a psychological inevitability that reflects Dickens' careful planning and firm hold on his subject. As in A Christmas Carol, the act of memory--even when memory is painful--softens the heart and makes repentance possible. Scrooge

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1. C.B., pp. 378-79.
2. B.H., xvi, 219.

had promised the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come that he would "'live in the Past, the Present, and the Future.'";[1] Dombey is rescued from the sterility of his life by his awakened power of recollection. In accepting the fact of time and change he learns to accept his own responsibility for the past, and so inherits, through Florence, a place in the future. She restores him to the continuity of life where, as a grandfather, he is able to repair some of the damage he has done as a father. On the last page of the novel we learn that "the white-haired gentleman" liked best to see his grandson "free and stirring": the breaches in Nature have been healed by Nature herself, and by the love and constancy of Florence. For in the changing world of Dombey and Son the qualities of faithfulness and compassion remain constant, and whether they are revealed in Captain Cuttle, Polly Toodle, or Florence, counteract the unnatural forces of pride and ambition. The final comment on Mr. Dombey's "master-vice" is provided by Cousin Feenix;

> 'And in regard to the changes of human life, and the extraordinary manner in which we are perpetually conducting ourselves, all I can say is, with my friend Shakespeare--man who wasn't for an age but for all time, and with whom my friend Gay is no doubt acquainted--that it's like the shadow of a dream.' (lxi, 872)

With characteristic delicacy (or absentmindedness) Cousin Feenix leaves the quotation incomplete, but we can assume that Dickens was recalling Guildenstern's remark in Hamlet that "the very substance of the ambitious is merely the shadow of a dream."[2]

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1. C.B., p. 70.
2. Act II, Scene ii, 264-66.

VII

Dombey and Son is the first fruit of what I have called Dickens' discovery of time, and we can define its importance in his development by saying that it is the first of his novels to show, in significant detail, the sense of society as a living organism. But his interest in time was becoming increasingly personal and autobiographical, and in his next two works of fiction, The Haunted Man (1848) and David Copperfield (1849-50), he made his first sustained attempt to confront directly the painful memories of his past. The idea of The Haunted Man, as we have seen, came to Dickens in the summer of 1846; he wrote the "first few slips" in 1847, but then abandoned the idea of a Christmas book to concentrate on Dombey.[1] By 1848 he had written the autobiographical fragment, and although this last Christmas book does not deal with the incidents of Dickens' past, as David Copperfield was to do, it is concerned with a problem which these private recollections must have raised: how is one to come to terms with the memory of "'sorrow, wrong, and trouble'"?[2]

At the beginning of this chapter I suggested that Dickens' interest in the supernatural is related to his interest in memory, and cited Master Humphrey's reflections by the fireside: "...who can wonder that that man should feel a vague belief in tales of disembodied spirits wandering through those places which they once

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1. See Forster, pp. 422-23, 466.
2. C.B., p. 336.

dearly affected, when he himself, scarcely less separated from his old world than they, is for ever lingering upon past emotions and bygone times, and hovering, the ghost of his former self, about the places and people that warmed his heart of old?"[1] In The Haunted Man the ghost has become a projection of Redlaw's memory, the second voice in an inner dialogue about the past, and Redlaw himself is not an old antiquarian like Master Humphrey, but a man who, in age, appearance, and social condition, is much closer to Dickens himself at this time. He is middle-aged, a "black attired figure, indefinably grim, although well-knit and well-proportioned"; like Dickens he is a man of distinction in his profession, "a learned man in chemistry, and a teacher on whose lips and hands a crowd of aspiring ears and eyes hung daily."[2] His power to uncombine the elements, and "to give back their component parts to fire and vapour," suggests the alchemy of Dickens' own creative gifts, and his upbringing recalls the resentments of Dickens' childhood revealed in the autobiography: "'No mother's self-denying love,'" the Ghost whispers to Redlaw, "'no father's counsel, aided me. A stranger came into my father's place when I was but a child, and I was easily an alien from my mother's heart. My parents, at the best, were of that sort whose care soon ends, and whose duty is soon done ...'"[3]

Redlaw's bitterest memories, however, centre round the

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1. Clock, p. 33.
2. C.B., p. 317.
3. C.B., pp. 318, 332.

treachery of a friend who betrayed the affection of his dearly loved sister, and who came between Redlaw and his sweetheart. The sister is dead but, like Mary Hogarth, she "'lived on to see me famous'"; the sweetheart unmistakably recalls Dickens' lost love for Maria Beadnell and the fictional transmutation of the episode in David Copperfield: "'So well remembered, that even now, when years have passed, and nothing is more idle or more visionary to me than the boyish love so long outlived, I think of it with sympathy, as if it were a younger brother's or a son's.'"[1] The Ghost offers Redlaw forgetfulness of past pain, but on the condition that he will communicate the gift, Midas-like, to all with whom he comes in contact. Redlaw goes out into the world and everyone he meets is suffering in some way, either through poverty, or sickness, or disappointment, but their humanity has been kept alive by the memory of past acts of kindness and sympathy in suffering. As they lose the power of memory they become hardened and selfish. Only two people remain untouched by his influence: Milly, the wife of the College porter, and a savage slum-child, into whose mind "'no softening memory of sorrow, wrong, or trouble'" has entered, because (as the Ghost points out) "'this wretched mortal from his birth has been abandoned to a worse condition than the beasts, and has, within his knowledge, no one contrast, no humanising touch, to make a grain of such a memory spring up in his hardened breast.'"[2] In the child Redlaw recognises a mirror of his own state of mind: "'The

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1. C.B., p. 333.
2. C.B., p. 378.

beneficent design of Heaven is in each case overthrown, and from the two poles of the immaterial world you come together.'"[1]

After the manner of the earlier Christmas Books, The Haunted Man ends on a note of happy domesticity. The influence of Milly's goodness heals the destruction which Redlaw's fatal gift has caused, and at the end she is helping him to recover his power of memory. The moral of the story is, as Dickens wrote to Forster, "that bad and good are inextricably linked in remembrance, and that you could not choose the enjoyment of recollecting only the good. To have all the best of it you must remember the worst also."[2] The Haunted Man represents an important step forward in Dickens' thinking about his past, because it indicates that he had come to accept that good and bad were "inextricably linked in remembrance," and that they both worked together to make him what he was. The motto of this last Christmas book, "'Lord, keep my memory green,'" might well serve as a motto for the whole genre and also for David Copperfield, the fictional autobiography which Dickens was now in a position to write.[3]

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1. C.B., p. 379.
2. Forster, p. 508.
3. C.B., p. 398.

CHAPTER II

DAVID COPPERFIELD: DICKENS AND THE SPIRIT OF THE PAST

".....The days gone by
Return upon me almost from the dawn
Of life: the hiding-places of man's power
Open; I would approach them, but they close.
I see by glimpses now; when age comes on,
May scarcely see at all; and I would give,
While yet we may, as far as words can give,
Substance and life to what I feel, enshrining
Such is my hope, the spirit of the Past
For future restoration....."

(Wordsworth, Prelude, XII, 277-86)

I

David Copperfield has long been recognised as pre-eminently a novel of memory. One contemporary reviewer observed that "every line is coloured with the hues of memory, and the subdued tone of a distant view is given to the whole," a judgment confirmed by Percy Lubbock when he praised the way in which "the long rhythm of Copperfield's memory" gave shape and unity to the book.[1] The publication of Dickens' unfinished autobiography in Forster's *Life* revealed, for the first time, the particularly close relationship between David Copperfield and his creator, and recently both Sylvère Monod and Arnold Kettle have suggested that this novel occupies a place in Dickens' art analogous to that of *The Prelude* in Wordsworth's: "The Growth of a Novelist's Mind."[2] My purpose here is to extend this line of enquiry to a consideration of the part played by memory in the novel, and to argue that in addition to dramatising many incidents from Dickens' past, *David Copperfield* also dramatises his imaginative relationship to the past--a process which makes his fictional autobiography a work of considerable significance in the total pattern of his development.

It may help to begin by noting some of the correspondences between *David Copperfield* and Dickens' own life. Three major

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1. *Prospective Review*, VII (1851), 157-91; quoted by George Ford in *Dickens and His Readers* (Princeton, 1955), second edition (New York, 1965), p. 128. Percy Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction* (1921), p. 129.

2. Sylvère Monod, *Dickens the Novelist* (Oklahoma, 1968), p. 317; Arnold Kettle, "Thoughts on 'David Copperfield'," *Review of English Literature*, II (1961), 65-74.

episodes from Dickens' past appear in the novel: his experiences in the blacking factory, his rise from law reporter to successful novelist, and his youthful love for Maria Beadnell, who became (with some traits borrowed from Catherine Dickens) Dora Spenlow. The parallels between life and art are particularly close in Chapter xi, where Dickens transformed James Lamert's blacking factory into Murdstone and Grinby's warehouse with, as he wrote to Forster at the time, "a very complicated interweaving of truth and fiction."[1] There are, however, some significant modifications in Dickens' treatment of the other two episodes. David enters Doctor's Commons with the intention of becoming a proctor--a respectable middle class ambition--whereas Dickens had only been a reporter there, and had started on the more lowly level of lawyer's apprentice. Similarly, Maria Beadnell had rejected the young Dickens, while in the novel David marries his Dora and is only separated from her by death. Thus the element of social and sexual insecurity in the original experiences is absent from the fictional account.

Elsewhere the process of transmutation is more complex. There is evidence to suppose that Agnes is an idealised portrait of Georgina Hogarth, the presiding angel of Dickens' household, but against this must be set the testimony of Hans Christian Andersen, who found Catherine, not Georgina, to be the model for Agnes.[2] A

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1. Forster, p. 497; letter of 10 July 1849. The autobiographical fragment was largely incorporated into Chapter xi.

2. See Elias Bredsdorff, Hans Andersen and Charles Dickens (Cambridge, 1956), p. 110.

similar fragmentation and complication of reality can be seen in the number of real and surrogate parents in David Copperfield. David's father dies before he is born, his mother shortly after her marriage to Murdstone; she is young, beautiful, and loving, and with Peggotty provides the security of family life which one can assume Dickens had known at Chatham. The Murdstones and Micawbers divide between them Dickens' conflicting feelings about the parental neglect which had condemned him to the drudgery of the blacking warehouse: resentment, shame, and anger are channelled into his portrait of the Murdstones, allowing him to absolve his father, so to speak, and paint him with affectionate mockery as Micawber. This division is interesting because it shows how Dickens projected his sense of outrage on to society at large: Murdstone is the archetype of the evangelical Victorian businessman and, of course, he is a shareholder in the warehouse. Finally, Betsey Trotwood represents the kind of wise and affectionate parent which Dickens must have wished he had had. As Sylvère Monod remarks, she "embodies the novelist's notion of what a parent must be in order to be at the same time, and in the fullest acceptation of the term, an educator."[1]

Forster observed of the autobiographical elements in David Copperfield that "it would be the greatest mistake to imagine anything like a complete identity of the fictitious novelist with the real one, beyond the Hungerford scenes; or to suppose that the youth, who then received his first harsh schooling in life, came out

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1. Dickens the Novelist, p. 330.

of it as little harmed or hardened as David did."[1] This is judiciously put, and it suggests the kind of pattern which Dickens imposed on his raw material: in uncovering the painful memories of his past, Dickens felt the need to transform them in the light of his mature status as a famous author and Victorian family man, with the result that David Copperfield is given a middle class security--and consequently a kind of immunity--which we know his creator did not have. From one point of view, then, David Copperfield is a success-story, the tale of a genteel child who recovers his birthright in spite of early deprivations and hardships. But the prejudices of art are usually on the side of failure: how is it that David Copperfield manages to hold our sympathies in his upward rise?

He does so, I would suggest, because the background to his career is one of almost tragic insecurity--an insecurity to which he is exposed as a young child and which, through the act of memory, he re-enters as an adult. On her deathbed Mrs. Copperfield repeats to Peggotty her first husband's belief "'that a loving heart was better and stronger than wisdom'" (ix, 132), but much of the pathos in this and other scenes in the novel stems from our consciousness that, in the real world as in the world of fiction, a loving heart alone is an insufficient defence against people like Mr. Murdstone and Steerforth. "The world breaks everyone, and afterward many are strong at the broken places"[2]--Hemingway's famous statement is

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1. Forster, p. 553.
2. A Farewell to Arms (1929), p. 267.

apposite here. Dickens shows David surviving his mistakes and going forward, becoming strong at the broken places, and yet there are some, like his mother and Dora, who are broken by the world, and others, like Ham and Em'ly, who never become strong at the broken places. David's successful emergence is tempered by the ties which bind him, in memory, to those who have suffered defeat at the hands of life. For in David Copperfield the past exists in dynamic relationship to the present: it is both something which David outgrows, the background against which his selfhood has emerged, and at the same time a remembered battleground in which the issue is uncertain, where the experience of failure and defeat can still be felt and thus modify the position of security towards which the novel tends. And in so far as the past is evoked in its full complexity, the act of memory in David Copperfield becomes something more than easy nostalgia; it is an imaginative process which, mediating between different states of being, can give depth and dimension to the narrator's mature perspective.

One can see an interesting example of the way in which Dickens relates past to present in a long interpolation he made in the original draft of the first number. After writing Chapter iii, in which David visits Yarmouth and meets little Em'ly, Dickens inserted the passage beginning "'You're quite a sailor, I suppose?' I said to Em'ly", and ending "This may be premature. I have set it down too soon, perhaps. But let it stand".[1] Here Em'ly reveals

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1. See Butt and Tillotson, Dickens at Work (1957), second edition (1968), pp. 118-19.

her fear of the sea and her ambition of becoming a lady, and the scene concludes with the striking tableau of her running out along a jagged timber of the jetty on which they are walking:

> The light, bold, fluttering little figure turned and came back safe to me, and I soon laughed at my fears, and at the cry I had uttered; fruitlessly in any case, for there was no one near. But there have been times since, in my manhood, many times there have been, when I have thought, Is it possible, among the possibilities of hidden things, that in the sudden rashness of the child and her wild look so far off, there was any merciful attraction of her into danger, any tempting her towards him permitted on the part of her dead father, that her life might have a chance of ending on that day? There has been a time since when I have wondered whether, if the life before her could have been revealed to me at a glance, and so revealed as that a child could fully comprehend it, and if her preservation could have depended on a motion of my hand, I ought to have held it up to save her. There has been a time since ...when I have asked myself the question, would it have been better for little Em'ly to have had the waters close above her head that morning in my sight; and when I have answered Yes, it would have been. (iii, 36)

In this way Em'ly is cast from the first in the light of her personal tragedy, and though Dickens does not specify, the nature of her future frailty is suggested: the symbolism of the "light, bold, fluttering little figure," in combination with her confessed aspiration to gentility, indicates that she will be susceptible to someone who can offer to make her a lady; while the sea, with its connotations of mystery and death, seems to prefigure that refuge in oblivion sought by the fallen women of Victorian fiction. The scene is certainly dramatic, but one may legitimately wonder why Dickens should have forsaken possibilities of suspense and development in Em'ly's character by so compromising her at the outset. The answer is to be found, I think, in the fact that

Dickens' focus falls here, as it does throughout the novel, on the character and reactions of David. The introduction of this future vista into the original manuscript shows Dickens at work reinforcing his hero's adult perspective with all the pathos of the past. Em'ly will fall in the course of life and David will survive, but not untouched: her loss will also be his, for (as Dickens is at pains to suggest later in the same chapter) he has already started to love her. They will be bound hereafter by the shared experience of their innocence.

Again and again throughout David Copperfield the past is brought into this sort of relationship with the present. When the first movement of the novel comes to an end in Dover, and David is safe between the "snow-white sheets" in his aunt's house, he remembers how "I thought of all the solitary places under the night sky where I had slept, and how I prayed that I never might be houseless any more, and never might forget the houseless" (xiii, 199). David Copperfield holds our sympathy as hero of his own novel by his capacity never to forget, in his security, those whom life has condemned to insecurity.

II

A sense of insecurity is strongest in the early chapters, and although David has to contend with difficulties throughout the novel, his arrival at Dover marks a real turning-point in his fortunes: he will never be houseless again. "The central critical

problem of the novel," Arnold Kettle observes, "must involve the question: what is the relation between the first quarter of the book and the rest?"[1] For many readers of David Copperfield, I suspect, the first thirteen chapters overshadow the rest, and no doubt this is partly explained by a quality of universality in David's childhood experience which is not so strongly felt in his later history. But it is also a question of the brilliance with which Dickens recreates the child's perspective. In Chapter ii ("I Observe") David looks back on his initial distrust of Mr. Murdstone and wonders if he could have felt jealous: "No such thing came into my mind, or near it. I could observe, in little pieces, as it were; but as to making a net of a number of these pieces, and catching anybody in it, that was, as yet, beyond me" (iii, 21). This is precisely how the young David sees the world, "in pieces", without analysis or interpretation. Yet the interesting point about his observations is that they add up (for the reader) to an immediacy and complexity of perception which David's later "mature" reflections rarely achieve.[2] The contrast in the same chapter between Murdstone's ponderous gallantry to Mrs. Copperfield and the cynicism he assumes with his friends at Lowestoft tells us more about his character than pages of commentary could, and it is all the more effective because David is throughout

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1. "Thoughts on 'David Copperfield'," p. 68.

2. I am indebted here to Roger Gard's interesting article on David Copperfield (Essays in Criticism, XV, July 1965, 313-25), in which he argues that "the force of presentation is intimately related to the clarity of a child's perception and to its corresponding incapacity to analyse impressions or bring events under control."

an innocent witness in the adult world. Moreover, in these early scenes he is a passive agent and therefore vulnerable, exposed to what one might call--without too heavy an emphasis--something of the tragic complexity of life. When his mother dies he knows that Murdstone is responsible, and yet when he goes into the parlour and sees his stepfather weeping by the fire, he is compelled to recognise that he too, in his way, had loved her. The painful reality of the whole episode is made possible by the child's naive, but honest and accurate observation.

It is only when David starts to reflect, when the pattern of the novel requires that he assume a mature and responsible attitude, that we become conscious of simplification. But this is increasingly the effect of chronological advance. As David grows older his more complicated past recedes into the distance, along with its mistakes and its lessons; as he comes to live more and more in a secure present the texture of recollection inevitably thins, and he inherits, together with the wisdom of maturity, something of its complacency. This pattern is probably intrinsic to the kind of novel David Copperfield is, but it does not make it any the less interesting. Although Dickens wants us to see David growing in wisdom as the novel progresses, it is, paradoxically, the early scenes which put us in touch with a vision of life that is serious, compelling, and (in its suggestion of tragic implications) complex--a vision which David can re-enter through the act of memory. As we shall see, the attitude to the past which Dickens wants us to take is not always compatible with the experience of the past which

his novel communicates.

How does memory operate in David Copperfield? The book is David's "written memory" (xlviii, 690), and the most striking feature of his recollections is their extraordinary intensity. For David, as for Dickens himself, the past has a reality of its own, a reality which can at any one moment challenge the authority of the present. Writing to Maria Beadnell in 1855, Dickens spoke of the "changeless Past" in which his memories of her were enshrined: "Believe me, you cannot more tenderly remember our old days and our old friends than I do ...I forget nothing of these times. They are just as still and plain and clear as if I had never been in a crowd since, and had never seen or heard my own name out of my own house."[1] David Copperfield shares his creator's imaginative adherence to a "changeless Past," and his deepest recollections exist in timeless and antithetical relationship to his present life. Memory intersects the action; a sound, a smell, the return to a familiar place can bring instantaneously into being what Proust called "the vast structure of recollection."[2] When he sees on his daughter's hand a ring similar to the engagement ring he had given Dora, there is a "momentary stirring" in his heart, "like pain" (xxxiii, 489). Long after Dora's death the scent of a geranium leaf brings back "a straw hat and blue ribbons, and a quantity of curls, and a little black dog being held up, in two slender arms,

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1. N, II, 626; letter of 10 February 1855.
2. Du Coté de Chez Swann, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff (Uniform Edition, 1941), I, 61.

against a bank of blossoms and bright leaves" (xxvi, 396).

Dickens heightens the reality of the past in many ways. The early chapters are characterised by the frequent use of hyperbole: the fruit in his mother's garden is "riper and richer than fruit has ever been since, in any other garden" (ii, 15); recalling his holidays at Yarmouth, it seems to David that he has never since seen "such sunlight as on those bright April afternoons" (x, 144). In the same way the incidents of David's childhood are invested by the adult narrator with a significance which dwarfs later events: his mother's funeral is "yesterday's event. Events of later date have floated from me to the shore where all forgotten things will reappear, but this stands like a high rock in the ocean" (ix, 131). As characters from the past are recalled, they come before David with a reality as immediate as that of his present life;

> Can I say of her face--altered as I have reason to remember it, perished as I know it is--that it is gone, when here it comes before me at this instant, as distinct as any face that I may choose to look on in a crowded street? Can I say of her innocent and girlish beauty, that it faded, and was no more, when its breath falls on my cheek now, as it fell that night? Can I say she ever changed, when my remembrance brings her back to life, thus only; and, truer to its loving youth than I have been, or man ever is, still holds fast what it cherished then? (ii, 24)

The preoccupation with the past shown by the adult narrator is in a sense anticipated by the interest David takes, as a youth, in the scenes and associations of his early childhood. A return to Yarmouth on leaving school gives him the opportunity to revisit Blunderstone, and "on three or four days that I can at once recall" he makes his pilgrimage to the old house: "my occupation in my

solitary pilgrimages was to recall every yard of the old road as I went along it, and to haunt the old spots, of which I never tired. I haunted them, as my memory had often done, and lingered among them as my younger thoughts had lingered when I was far away" (xxii, 319). This concern with time and change is even reflected in the humour of the novel--always an accurate register of Dickens' imaginative interests--and the prevailing sense of mutation finds comic counterpoint in Micawber's nostalgic addresses to "the companion of my youth" and in the rhetoric of Julia Mills: "'Do not allow a trivial misunderstanding to wither the blossoms of spring, which, once put forth and blighted, cannot be renewed. I speak ...from experience of the past--the remote irrevocable past'" (xxxiii, 484-85).

There are various stages in Dickens' treatment of the past in David Copperfield. In those wonderful opening chapters David has not yet developed a consciousness of time, and so exists beyond its influence. At Yarmouth with Em'ly the "days sported by us, as if Time had not grown up himself yet, but were a child too, and always at play" (iii, 37). His relationship with his mother has no temporal definition; it precedes and eludes the book's chronology:

> Now I am in the garden at the back, beyond the yard where the empty pigeon-house and dog-kennel are--a very preserve of butterflies, as I remember it, with a high fence, and a gate and padlock; where the fruit clusters on the trees, riper and richer than fruit has ever been since, in any other garden, and where my mother gathers some in a basket, while I stand by, bolting furtive gooseberries, and trying to look unmoved. A great wind rises, and the summer is gone in a moment. We are playing in the winter twilight,

> dancing about the parlour. When my mother is out of breath and rests herself in an elbow-chair, I watch her winding her bright curls round her fingers, and straightening her waist, and nobody knows better than I do that she likes to look so well, and is proud of being so pretty. (ii, 15-16)

This is the Eden of early memory, and in its quality of timelessness is to remain the fixed focus of David's thoughts about his mother. There is a hint of the vanity which will render her susceptible to Murdstone, but essentially she exists for him at a level beneath character and causality, where the seasons change with a flap of the wind and the fruit on the trees is "riper and richer than fruit has ever been since, in any other garden." And so it is that when she dies, the intervening misery of her marriage to Murdstone and all the pain this brings to David is cancelled out, and the earliest memory reasserts itself with a new intensity:

> From the moment of my knowing of the death of my mother, the idea of her as she had been of late had vanished from me. I remembered her, from that instant, only as the young mother of my earliest impressions, who had been used to wind her bright curls round and round her finger, and to dance with me at twilight in the parlour. What Peggotty had told me now, was so far from bringing me back to the later period, that it rooted the earlier image in my mind. It may be curious, but it is true. In her death she winged her way back to her calm untroubled youth, and cancelled all the rest. (ix, 133)

David Copperfield shares with Dickens the capacity to partition off his deepest responses and experiences in an area of his being where they remain inaccessible to, or at least unaffected by, the larger processes of thought by which he attempts to account for the past. David's mother has an imaginative existence for him in a "changeless Past," beyond the reach of time and outside

the interpretative scope of his history: this pattern is repeated at significant stages throughout the novel, notably in David's attitude to Dora and Steerforth, and it has far-reaching implications for our interpretation of his character and growth.

The strength of these early chapters derives from Dickens' capacity to evoke in a particular fiction the deepest associations of common experience, a quality in his genius which led Chesterton to call him "the last of the mythologists, and perhaps the greatest."[1] But when David comes to Dover and is at last given a stable home by his Aunt, the character of his recollections changes. As he grows older in an atmosphere of security it becomes possible for him to detach himself from his early childhood and speculate upon it. He can now evaluate his relationship to a past that was previously chaotic, can feel shame and resentment at what has happened to him. On going back to school he is aware of being isolated from his companions through ignorance and, much more acutely, through the fact of "having acquired experiences foreign to my age, appearance, and condition as one of them ...How would it affect them, who were so innocent of london life and London streets, to discover how knowing I was (and was ashamed to be) in some of the meanest phases of both?" (xvi, 228-29). This reaction is a perfectly understandable one, but it is symptomatic of a division that has already developed between the different areas of David's experience. From the first, and for the best of reasons, Betsey Trotwood encourages her nephew to dissociate himself from his pre-Dover past: she changes his Christian name to Trotwood

1. Charles Dickens (1906), p. 87.

and loses no occasion to criticise the unworldiness of David's mother and the "barbarity" of Peggotty, whose name she would also like to alter. The result is that by the time David leaves Dr. Strong's Academy he can already look back to his coming there as to a remote distance: "That little fellow seems to be no part of me; I remember him as something left behind upon the road of life--as something I have passed, rather than have actually been--and almost think of him as of someone else" (xviii, 268).

It is inevitable that David's adoption by his aunt should mean a break with the past, and her efforts to turn him into a "'fine firm fellow, with a will of your own'" (xix, 275) command our respect, issuing as they do from a generous concern for his welfare and success in life. But although David has suffered in his early childhood, he has also known intense joy--his mother's love, the protecting care of Peggotty, the Yarmouth idyll with little Em'ly. One can sense an initial limitation in the ideal of cautious self-advancement for which Betsey Trotwood is the first spokesman, in the realisation that the new beginning she offers involves the repudiation of an area of David's life in which much that is precious is inextricably bound to what is painful. In other words, the prudence she advocates works against a complex recognition of the past.

III

David's relationship with Dora points to more serious limitations in the novel's achieved position. For all her silliness and wifely incompetence, Dora represents a natural choice for David in a way that Agnes never does, perhaps because she offers a real link with the past of his childhood. Like his mother she is a child-wife, doomed to an early death in a world for which she is insufficiently "firm," and his attempts to form her character recall Murdstone's disastrous efforts with Clara Copperfield.[1] Her death, too, repeats the pattern of his mother's death, in which an earlier, happy memory supplants the consciousness of change or alteration in David's feelings: "Ever rising from the sea of my remembrance, is the image of the dear child as I knew her first, graced by my young love, and by her own, with every fascination wherein such love is rich" (liii, 768). Dickens is obliged, however, to present their love and marriage from the viewpoint of David's chastened heart, with the result that the tone of the Dora passages is invariably one of affectionate but ironic nostalgia, as befits an episode poignant in itself, but now outgrown: "What an idle time it was! What an unsubstantial, happy, foolish time it was!..." (xxxiii, 489). But the intensity of real feeling keeps breaking through, and the interesting point about David's

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1. Despite the antipathy between David and Murdstone there is also, as Monod notes, "a likeness between them which is all the more interesting as the author seems to have neither desired nor perceived it" (Dickens the Novelist, p. 321).

memory of Dora is that, like the memory of his mother, it leaves the impression of an experience which has not been mastered or ever fully outgrown. Here, for example, is the opening of Chapter xliii, "Another Retrospect," in which David recalls the early days of his engagement to Dora:

> Once again, let me pause upon a memorable period of my life. Let me stand aside, to see the phantoms of those days go by me, accompanying the shadow of myself, in dim procession.
>
> Weeks, months, seasons, pass along. They seem little more than a summer day and a winter evening. Now, the Common where I walk with Dora is all in bloom, a field of bright gold; and now the unseen heather lies in mounds and bunches underneath a covering of snow. In a breath, the river that flows through our Sunday walks is sparkling in the summer sun, is ruffled by the winter wind, or thickened with drifting heaps of ice. Faster than ever river ran towards the sea, it flashes, darkens, and rolls away.

True to his mature perspective, David is at pains to distance himself from the recollection--"Let me stand aside"--and the emphasis falls on the unsubstantiality of the past: the agents are "phantoms," the procession "dim," he himself a "shadow." The intended effect is of the inevitable passing of time, and with it the ephemeral experience which the passage commemorates. But at the same time there is a contrary movement at work in the prose here which resists this construction on the part of the narrator. It reveals itself, for instance, in the fact that David's memory of Dora exists in the same timeless region inhabited by the thoughts of his mother: there is the same concentration and confusion of the seasons--"They seem little more than a summer day and a winter evening"--, a similar hyperbole (the Common "all in bloom, a field

of bright gold"), the same quality of an experience both within and beyond time. Moreover, the language of evocation is excited and fresh--"bloom," "bright gold," "unseen heather," "sparkling in the summer sun," "flashes"--hinting at a vitality curiously incompatible with the attitude Dickens and David want the reader to take towards this recollection; and the effect of "darkens" in the last line is not to accustom us to an easy acceptance of change, but to depress with a sense of emotion deadened before it has been fully realised. While the passage maintains a surface tone of comfortable nostalgia towards the events described, the inner movement of the prose drives back into a timeless past of quickened feeling and unfulfilled promise.

David consistently deprecates himself as "a lackadaisical young spooney" (xxvi, 394), but these passages in the novel are touching not so much for the character of Dora herself as for the intensity of David's feelings for her, an intensity which relates this episode to the memory of his mother and hence to the early chapters. In the same way, his memories of Dora serve to fertilise his experience, extending and complicating the pattern he seeks to impose upon it. She arouses in him, as Agnes cannot, an earlier, impulsive, more vulnerable individual, whose capacity to make mistakes is the function of a generous response to life. That the explicit moral of David Copperfield lies in an altogether opposite direction, that Dickens asks us to see both fulfilment and maturity in David's feelings for Agnes--this, I would suggest, is the central ambiguity of the novel. In a world where others have lost

so much, Dickens reconciles us imaginatively to his hero's success by the implication that he too has lost something, a capacity for intense feeling, a certain heightened response to the world which is now no longer possible for him. One thinks of Wordsworth and the Immortality Ode: "The things which I have seen I now can see no more."[1] The deep imaginative identification with the states of feeling which condition the imprudence and unworldiness of those characters who, in Hemingway's sense, have been broken by life, works against the tone of mellow acceptance that the adult, domesticated David assumes. Through the act of memory this contrary process operates to enrich the book's total perspective, but in the case of Agnes it also has the effect of undermining the convention in which Dickens is working.

IV

The trouble with Agnes is that the nature and tendency of her "wisdom" is peculiarly hostile to the more complex responses which a reading of David Copperfield evokes. Since her function in the plot is to embody prudence, she exists from the first as an enemy of the imprudence towards which so much of the book's unconscious movement tends. Whereas Dora calls David by his Christian name, Agnes adopts Aunt Betsey's name, Trotwood, thereby aligning herself with his aunt in her effort to diminish his pre-

1. Line 9.

Dover identity; and as the chief agent in Aunt Betsey's attempt to turn David into a "'fine firm fellow, with a will of your own'", she inherits all the unfortunate connotations with which "firmness" is already associated in our minds--"Firmness, I may observe, was the grand quality on which both Mr. and Miss Murdstone took their stand" (iv, 49). David's marriage to her spells the end of his own imprudence, of course, but also the end of his involvement in the imprudence of others, in particular those fallible lives which, by the nature of their failure, suggest the emotional limitations of the success ideal he has embraced; it is significant that before he can marry her, Mr. Peggotty, Em'ly, and the Micawbers all have to emigrate to Australia.

Agnes is present at his first dissipation, and in disapproving of Steerforth she sets herself in opposition to another of David's more complicated loyalties. She is of course right about Steerforth, and David (and the reader) knows that she is right; what is strange about her disapproval is that it arouses so little moral sympathy in the novel as a whole, for Steerforth's seduction of Em'ly is perhaps the only episode in which the mistaken impulses of David's undisciplined heart are shown to have had painful consequences for others apart from himself. It is his hero-worship which leads him to take Steerforth to Yarmouth in the first place, just as it is his moral blindness--"'You have no best to me, Steerforth ...and no worst'" (xxix, 436)--which prevents him seeing the obvious signs of his friend's intended treachery. He is indirectly responsible for what happens, yet there is no sign of

reproach, let alone self-reproach, in his subsequent reaction:

> What is natural in me, is natural in many other men, I infer, and so I am not afraid to write that I never had loved Steerforth better than when the ties that bound me to him were broken. In the keen distress of the discovery of his unworthiness, I thought more of all that was brilliant in him, I softened more towards all that was good in him, I did more justice to the qualities that might have made him a man of a noble nature and a great name, than ever I had done in the height of my devotion to him. Deeply as I felt my own unconscious part in his pollution of an honest home, I believed that if I had been brought face to face with him, I could not have uttered one reproach. I should have loved him so well still ...I should have held in so much tenderness the memory of my affection for him, that I think I should have been as weak as a spirit-wounded child, in all but the entertainment of a thought that we could ever be re-united. That thought I never had. I felt, as he had felt, that all was at an end between us. What his remembrances of me were, I have never known ...but mine of him were as the remembrances of a cherished friend, who was dead. (xxxii, 455)

David's response is indeed curious, and it gives a very accurate indication of the imaginative preoccupations of the novel. In another novelist (Jane Austen and Henry James spring to mind) the recognition of Steerforth's treachery would undoubtedly have involved a radical reinterpretation of his character, the acceptance of personal responsibility for what had happened, and an access of sympathetic awareness for the moral values which Agnes has always represented. One thinks of the way, in Pride and Prejudice, Elizabeth Bennet's discovery of Wickham's true character alters her response to Darcy. In fact, very little of this process of moral self-discovery takes place, and it is worth asking why. A convenient answer would be: "Dickens is not that kind of novelist", and yet, as Professor Monod has convincingly demonstrated,[1]

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1. "James Steerforth ou le problème du mal dans David Copperfield", Annales de l'Université de Paris, XXXVII (1967), 166-76.

Steerforth's character has been carefully prefigured in the events leading up to the seduction. The telling phrase is "I should have held in so much tenderness the memory of my affection for him ..."; what we are witnessing here is a process of imaginative reversion similar in kind to that already noted in the case of David's mother, where death cancels the recognition of change in her character. Instead of dispelling David's illusion, Steerforth's action in fact consolidates it, sealing off the earlier memory in his consciousness. Betrayal comes, significantly, as a death: "What his remembrances of me were, I have never known ...but mine of him were as the remembrances of a cherished friend, who was dead." The fact that we do not criticise David's continuing loyalty to the memory of his friend is in keeping with the retrospective mood of the novel as a whole; it is entirely in character, for in cherishing Steerforth's memory David is really cherishing the state of innocent idealisation which this lost leader had once inspired.

The imaginative loyalty to an outgrown past which we have seen in David's recollections of Dora and Steerforth is not the only respect in which the prudent domestic ideal Agnes represents is undermined in David Copperfield. Humour works, as so often in Dickens, to similar subversive ends. Mr. Micawber is a difficult character to place in the scheme of the novel, and one risks the charge of solemnity in attempting to do so. Like many others he is imprudent, but unlike them does not have to abide by the consequences of his imprudence. Moreover, in a work which gives

so many examples of unequal sexual relationships, it cannot be denied that he and Mrs. Micawber are splendidly matched: their domestic happiness may be comic, they may be hopelessly inadequate as parents, but the real feeling they have for each other emerges all the more forcibly through the atmosphere of uncertainty which surrounds most of the marriages in the book.

Mr. Micawber is the one character in the novel to span the gulf between those whom life has made and those whom it has broken: indeed he is indifferent to the distinction, and the final prospering in Australia which so outraged Chesterton is in fact psychologically accurate. In a world where economic hardship can only be compounded by unwanted children, he and his wife go on reproducing, and far from being dismayed at the prospect of his own fecundity he justifies it in the highest terms--"He gave us to understand that in our children we lived again, and that, under the pressure of pecuniary difficulties, any accession to their number was doubly welcome" (xxviii, 421). Micawber survives by virtue of his capacity to mimic the behaviour of the respectable: he flouts all the rigid categories of success and failure, caution and incaution, in the novel, while at the same time paying eloquent lip-service to the attitude of mind which makes these categories. In the context, his behaviour is a magnificent parody of the pieties of the middle class culture to which he belongs. Everywhere he invests imprudence with the delights of laughter. When, for example, Aunt Betsey enquires after the prospects of his eldest son, Micawber replies:

> "It was my hope when I came here," said Mr. Micawber, "to have got Wilkins into the Church: or perhaps I shall express my meaning more strictly, if I say the Choir. But there was no vacancy for a tenor in the venerable Pile for which this city is so justly eminent; and he has--in short, he has contracted a habit of singing in public-houses, rather than in sacred edifices." (lii, 762)

The reader is well aware by now that young Wilkins' habit of singing in public-houses is wholly attributable to Micawber's delinquency as a parent: he has never had a chance to be otherwise. The reference to the parental ambition of getting his son into the Church is a mere gesture in the direction of Betsey Trotwood and the social priorities which, in this instance, she represents. The actual effect of Micawber's speech, however, as he descends from the lofty ambition of a "son in the Church" to the more humble hope of a place in the Choir and finally to the crude reality of his son singing in a pub, is not to direct attention to his own irresponsibility as a father, but rather to project ridicule on to the habit of thought by which it is considered respectable for a father to enter his son for the Church. The public-house is the touchstone whereby these middle class aspirations become ridiculous, and in the infection of Micawber's presence it is the social convention at which we laugh.

V

A full account of subversive elements in the book would have to take into consideration, for instance, the way in which

Uriah Heep's career and marital aspirations parallel David's own, just as his affectation of humility would seem to parody the religious self-effacement of David's feeling for Agnes. There is not room for such an investigation here, and in any case enough has probably been said by now to indicate how precariously the hero's mature stance is held in David Copperfield. Although Dickens brings his novelist-hero to rest in what seems (for a writer) a singularly unpromising ideal of prudent domesticity,[1] at the same time he manages to suggest throughout the losses, the compensations, the imaginative impoverishment, which this final position involves. This ambiguity is so far from destroying the unity of the book that it lends a coherence and authenticity to the pattern of the hero's development which the overt moral does not supply; for in David Copperfield Dickens has dramatised a familiar experience of the Nineteenth Century (and particularly the Victorian) imagination. One finds a similar reaction in this passage from one of Matthew Arnold's letters, written to his sister in 1851:

> How strong the tendency is, though, as characters take their bent, and lives their separate course, to submit oneself gradually to the silent influence that attaches us more and more to those whose characters are like ours, and whose lives are running the same way with our own, and that detaches us from everything besides, as if we could only acquire any solidity of shape and power of acting by narrowing and narrowing our sphere, and diminishing the

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1. It is difficult not to agree with Angus Wilson's comment on Agnes: "A successful novelist guided by her 'deep wisdom' would surely become a smug, insensitive, comfortable old best seller of the worst kind" ("The Heroes and Heroines of Dickens," Review of English Literature, II [1961], 14).

> number of affections and interests which continually distract us while young, and hold us unfixed and without energy to mark our place in the world; which we thus succeed in marking only by making it a very confined and joyless one. The aimless and unsettled, but also open and liberal state of our youth we must perhaps all leave and take refuge in our morality and character; but with most of us it is a melancholy passage from which we emerge shorn of so many beams that we are almost tempted to quarrel with the law of nature which imposes it on us.[1]

The final refuge which David takes in "morality and character" is won at the expense of the "open and liberal" state of his youth. David Copperfield is not the story of an undisciplined heart; its real subject is a changed and changing heart, and as such it offers a representative example of the way in which one of the central discoveries of the Romantic Movement found its way into English fiction. Wordsworth has already been mentioned, and the book's motto might well be taken from the "Immortality Ode":

> Though nothing can bring back the hour
> Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;
> We will grieve not, rather find
> Strength in what remains behind ...[2]

What does remain behind for David, of course, is the intensity of his recollective powers. At one stage of the novel Betsey Trotwood remarks that it is in vain to recall the past, "'unless it works some influence upon the present '" (xxiii, 347), and David Copperfield might be described as an effort of the imagination to comprehend the process of change in the heart of its hero, in order to work an influence upon the present. That influence is no less than to

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1. Letters of Matthew Arnold, ed. G.W.E. Russell (1895), I, 14; letter of 25 January 1851.
2. Lines 181-84.

keep the imagination itself alive within the limitations of a mid-Victorian domestic ideal, a process which can only be sustained by vicarious contact with the past. As it is recalled, memory works subversively in the interests of complexity and emotional vitality: it is the principle by which David Copperfield holds his creative survival. Hablot Browne's final illustration, in which a portrait of Dora hangs over the mantelpiece while Agnes sits with David and their children by the fireside, is emblematic of the reconciliation he has made between past and present, and also of the instinct which compels him to record his "written memory."

We are now in a position to understand the important part which David Copperfield plays in the development of Dickens' art. The real significance of this novel lies not so much in what it can tell us about the incidents of Dickens' life, as in what it reveals about the workings of his creative process, and in particular about his imaginative relationship to the past. "'Lord, keep my memory green'" had been the motto of The Haunted Man, in which Dickens had first presented the idea "that bad and good are inextricably linked in remembrance, and that you could not choose the enjoyment of recollecting only the good. To have all the best of it you must remember the worst also."[1] Both The Haunted Man and David Copperfield have a common origin in Dickens' concern to reconcile his early sufferings with the fame and apparent security

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1. Forster, p. 508.

of his middle age, and just as memory functions as the agent of moral renewal in the Christmas Book, so in David Copperfield it is the hero's ability to keep his memory green which saves him as an artist. No doubt Dickens believed in the ideas of prudence and quiet domesticity which his novel enforces, but these did not make him the great novelist he was; what did was his capacity to return, like David Copperfield, to the sources of suffering and joy in his youth, where "bad and good are inextricably linked in remembrance."

When Forster praised his friend's book, he paid tribute to "the generally healthful and manly tone of the story of Copperfield," and then went on to observe that "the practical man is the outcome of the fanciful youth; and a more than equivalent for the graces of his visionary days, is found in the active sympathies that life has opened to him."[1] This comment is perfectly sensible and just, and generations of readers have taken a similar meaning from David Copperfield. The interpretation for which I have argued need not conflict with the conscious moral of the novel; indeed it is one of the conditions of David's growth that he should take a final refuge in morality and character, and like Wordsworth find "abundant recompense" in the active sympathies of his maturer years.[2] When he rationalises the "old unhappy loss or want of something" as a need for the stable companionship which Agnes can provide,

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1. Forster, pp. 552, 554.
2. "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," line 88.

we recognise that this is inevitable, but we know too that she can never compensate David for all that he has lost. It is only in the act of memory that he can recover that sense of promise and possibility, and with it an awareness of life's infinite complexity, which he had in his youth and which, won back in middle age through imagination, makes him an artist.

CHAPTER III

THE CONTEMPORARY SCENE: *BLEAK HOUSE* AND *HARD TIMES*

> "But let us not lose the use of Dickens's wit and insight, because he chooses to speak in a circle of stage fire. He is entirely right in his main drift and purpose in every book he has written; and all of them, but especially *Hard Times*, should be studied with close and earnest care by persons interested in social questions. They will find much that is partial, and, because partial, apparently unjust; but if they examine all the evidence on the other side, which Dickens seems to overlook, it will appear, after all their trouble, that his view was the finally right one, grossly and sharply told."
>
> (Ruskin, *Unto this Last*.)

I

It might be said that in David Copperfield Dickens attempted to square his sensibility with that of his age, reconciling the sufferings of his childhood with his mature status as a famous author and a Victorian family man. In its general conclusions about the problems of growth, love, and marriage, this novel may appear a representative work and (on one level) an invaluable source of information about Victorian middle class attitudes and behaviour. But at the same time as Dickens seems to endorse a prudential response to these problems, his novel is a testing of the imaginative resources of the cautious philosophy which David accepts, and the ambiguity of the book's total perspective suggests that the balance he struck between past and present was a precarious one. Dickens was only thirty-eight when David Copperfield was completed and, as Angus Wilson remarks, "the mood of mellow, wise reflection is surely too easily held; and ...held all too prematurely."[1] David's capacity to live happily in the present is related to his ability to re-enter imaginatively the "changeless Past." It was thus in the nature of Dickens' reconciliation with the past that he should return to it again, re-shaping it in the light of changing attitudes and new experiences, and we shall see that his next major essay in fictional autobiography, Little Dorrit, is in many ways a radical revision of David Copperfield.

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1. "The Heroes and Heroines of Dickens," p. 14.

But the immediate effect of writing David Copperfield was one of release and renewed creativity. Having taken the world into his confidence (or as much of his confidence as he was able to reveal at the time) Dickens had, as it were, declared the private basis for his reformist involvement in the injustice, cruelty, and social oppression of the Victorian age. Retreat into the past was followed by a characteristic re-dedication to the claims of the present. Although the whole of his career can be seen as a fulfilment of David Copperfield's prayer that he "never might be houseless any more, and never might forget the houseless" (xiii, 199), it was in the years immediately after David Copperfield that he spoke with the greatest urgency for the houseless and the dispossessed: the years, that is to say, of Bleak House, Hard Times, and Little Dorrit. The attempt to write about the injustices of his own past sharpened his awareness of the injustice in the world around him; the autobiographical impulse was continuous with, and complementary to, his reformist concern for society.

One can discern this outward movement even at the time of writing David Copperfield. While Dickens was engaged with the first monthly number in April 1849, he found time to write a scathing article for the Examiner on the aquittal of Drouet, proprietor of the infamous Tooting "baby-farm" at which over one hundred and fifty pauper children had died. Drouet was manifestly responsible for maltreating the children to the point at which their natural resistance was seriously weakened, but it could not be proved that they would not have died of cholera in any event. The

prosecution case rested on Drouet's failure to provide adequate treatment for one particular child, but the judge acquitted him of manslaughter on the grounds that it was impossible to distinguish this child from the others. Dickens was outraged by the legal manipulation whereby the very enormity of Drouet's neglect and cruelty had saved him from conviction: "For who, in such a crowd of children, could have singled out one poor child at any time, to say whether he was well or ill?... There was no doctor to examine the children when they left, or when they returned; and evidence of half the wickedness of the 'farm' was rejected, because one wretched little figure could not always be separated from a crowd exactly like himself, and shown as he contended with horrors to which all were equally exposed."[1] One can be sure that Dickens' response to the Tooting scandal reinforced his purpose in the novel he was writing, and vice-versa. The story of "one poor child" in David Copperfield would individualise the sufferings of children everywhere, and although very different from the Tooting children, David would make his appeal for a recognition of their common humanity. And so, as K.J. Fielding points out, "the same man who felt driven to write for the weekly press when he was burning to get on with his novel naturally turns from concern for himself to sympathy for others, and then turns back once more to his own work of the imagination which was itself partly composed of pages from

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1. "The Verdict for Drouet," Examiner, 21 April 1849; M.P., pp. 149-50.

his autobiography."[1]

There is, then, a close relationship between Dickens' confrontation with the past in writing David Copperfield and his increasing involvement in contemporary social issues, and it is no accident that the articles he wrote for the Examiner in 1848 and 1849 were followed, in 1850, by the founding of his own periodical. David Copperfield was completed in October 1850, six months after the first issue of Household Words had appeared. "We seek to bring into innumerable homes," Dickens wrote in his "Preliminary Word," "...the knowledge of many social wonders, good and evil, that are not calculated to render any of us less ardently persevering in ourselves, less tolerant of one another, less faithfull in the progress of mankind ..." Yet there was to be "no mere utilitarian spirit, no iron binding of the mind to harsh realities"; the journal would set out to show "that in all familiar things, even in those which are repellent on the surface, there is Romance enough."[2] Household Words was to arouse a social awareness in its readers, but not in such a way as to alienate them: like Bleak House, it was to dwell "upon the romantic side of familiar things."[3]

Among the "familiar things" which Dickens brought before his readers in Household Words were most of the social problems of the day: public health, legal and administrative reform, crime, education, industrial disputes, factory conditions, hospitals, asylums, and so

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1. "Dickens and the Past: The Novelist of Memory," p. 120.
2. H.W., I, 30 March 1850, 1; M.P., p. 167.
3. "Preface to the First Edition of 'Bleak House'," C.P., p. 311.

on. In addition to writing many articles himself, Dickens took responsibility for commissioning others and actively supervised every stage of publication. As Percy Fitzgerald said, there are "traces of him on every page."[1] A topical, reforming interest is perhaps most marked in the first five years of Household Words, from 1850 to 1855, and those were also the years in which he published a monthly news-supplement, the Household Narrative. Thereafter Dickens' direct involvement in contemporary affairs tended to decline, and it is perhaps significant that this decline coincided with another upheaval from the past and a different attempt, in Little Dorrit, to come to terms with it imaginatively. But the early years of Household Words are a high-water mark in Dickens' career as a reforming journalist and novelist, and the novels he wrote at this time owe much of their enlarged social scope to his activities as the editor of a popular journal. They bear out Humphry House's statement that "Dickens himself is far more factual than might appear; the best commentaries on many parts of his novels are his own articles and short stories, and articles and stories that he supervised as editor."[2] The relationship between fiction and journalism is particularly close in the case of Hard Times and, as we shall see later in this chapter, a reading of Household Words helps to define the targets of Dickens' satire.

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1. Memories of Charles Dickens (1913), p. 105; quoted in Philip Collins, "The Significance of Dickens's Periodicals," Review of English Literature, II (1961), 55.
2. The Dickens World, p. 14.

II

Bleak House (1852-53) is the first of the novels which can be extensively documented from *Household Words*, and perhaps for this reason scholars have tended to stress its topical elements. John Butt, for instance, has demonstrated how Dickens constructed a "fable for 1852" out of such diverse contemporary material as legal reform, Puseyism, public health, philanthropy, feminism, the rise of the new industrialists, and the condition of Parliament.[1] What has not perhaps received sufficient attention is the fact that, in addition to its interest as a contemporary document, *Bleak House* also represents a new departure for Dickens in his treatment of time. The novel is written in two distinct narratives which offer different perspectives on the same social situation and approach it from different time-scales. One is written in a dramatic present tense and surveys society with a hawk-like omniscience and a topical urgency which in some ways recalls the articles Dickens and his contributors were writing in *Household Words*; the other, that of Esther Summerson, is an autobiographical narrative in the manner of *David Copperfield*, private, introspective, concerned with the changing relations of a small group of characters as they come into contact with the larger world about them.

Like *Little Dorrit* and *Great Expectations*, *Bleak House* is deliberately set back in time to an earlier period. If we assume that Esther is writing in or around 1852, then the fact that her

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1. *Dickens at Work*, pp. 177-200.

narrative ends "full seven happy years" (lxvii, 877) after Richard Carstone's death suggests that the main action took place in the early eighteen-forties. Humphry House, who has written so well on this aspect of Dickens' work, makes rather heavy weather of the "inconsistent" chronology of Bleak House: in fact the only inconsistency is the reference to the "number of poor Spanish refugees walking about in cloaks, smoking little paper cigars" (xliii, 593), where Dickens is drawing on his childhood memory of the Torrijos party exiles, familiar around St. Pancras between 1823 and 1830.[1] House rightly regards Inspector Bucket as belonging to the "reformed world," but this does not mean that his presence in the novel is incongruous, for the Detective Department had been founded in 1842.[2] In other areas Dickens' use of period detail is both consistent and revealing. Thus, we learn near the end of the novel that preparations are being made for the coming of the railroads to Lincolnshire: "Railroads shall soon traverse all this country ...but, as yet, such things are non-existent in these parts, though not wholly unexpected" (lv, 745). This indicates a time before the opening of the Midland line to Lincoln in 1846. There is, perhaps, even a special significance in Dickens' choice of Lincolnshire, for it was central to all the schemes afoot in the eighteen-forties to construct a direct line from London to York--a fact many of his readers must have remembered.[3] Lincoln was also the Parliamentary

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1. Dickens World, pp. 30-33.
2. Not, as House states (p. 32), in 1844; see Collins, Dickens and Crime, p. 197.
3. See Hamilton Ellis, British Railway History, I (1954), 162-75.

seat of the notorious railophobe, Colonel Sibthorpe, who repudiated these innovations with an aristocratic disdain worthy of Sir Leicester Dedlock himself: "He would rather, he said, meet a highwayman, or see a burglar on his premises, than an engineer; he would be much more safe, and of the two classes he thought the former the more respectable."[1]

Dickens' attention to details of experience shared with most of his contemporary readers is reinforced by a more general flavour of the past, which one detects not only in the backward glance of Esther's narrative, but also in the descriptions of London and the legal world. In some ways, the London of Bleak House is a city of the dead, where the past crowds the present and the corpses in Jo's cemetery reach out to infect the living.[2] One thinks of the opening paragraph and Dickens' fancy that "it would not be wonderful to meet a megalosaurus ...waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill" (i, 1), or of Mr. Snagsby telling his apprentices "how he has heard say that a brook 'as clear as crystial' once ran right down the middle of Holborn, when Turnstile really was a turnstile, leading slap away into the meadows" (x, 130). At such moments we are reminded of the rural past which lies beneath the

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1. Ellis, p. 34.

2. Dickens always had a tendency to see London in this way. Sensitive to contemporary changes, he was also aware of the city's historical past. In an Uncommercial Traveller piece written in 1860 he said of the older London churches that "they remain like the tombs of the old citizens who lie beneath them and around them, Monuments of another age" ("City of London Churches," A.Y.R., III, 5 May 1860, 89; U.T., p. 93).

chaotic surface of the modern city, and there is even a suggestion of urban pastoral in Dickens' description of Chancery in the Long vacation, becalmed "in a hot sleep; Westminster Hall itself is a shady solitude where nightingales might sing, and a tenderer class of suitors than is usually found there, walk" (xix, 258). The background is the almost timeless corruption, the interminable length of the law-suit, as vacation and term succeed one another in the court of Chancery and the seasons change down at Chesney Wold.

Like Dombey and Son, Bleak House is deeply informed with the sense of time and change. From the very opening of the novel we are aware of the author's own consciousness of time, and of the way in which his characters are partly defined by their response to time. Sir Leicester Dedlock is supported by the "old-fashioned old gentleman," Mr. Tulkinghorn, and we are reminded from the first how "there are noble Mausoleums rooted for centuries in retired glades of parks, among the growing timber and fern, which perhaps hold fewer noble secrets than walk abroad among men, shut up in the breast of Mr. Tulkinghorn" (ii, 11). Both the world of fashion and the Court of Chancery commit their inhabitants to the past: Mr. Guppy emulates Tulkinghorn in his researches into Lady Dedlock's history, the hangers-on at Chesney Wold reject the claims of the present "by putting back the hands upon the Clock of Time, and cancelling a few hundred years of history" (xii, 160). But although Dickens has nothing but scorn for those, like Mr. Turveydrop, who remain wilfully corseted in the past, his treatment of Sir Leicester himself is more complex. When past and future confront each other

in the meeting between the aristocrat and the ironmaster in Chapter xxviii, Dickens' admiration for the energetic contemporary man is tempered by an almost lyrical evocation of the historical repose of Chesney Wold:

> Sir Leicester is content enough that the ironmaster should feel that there is no hurry there; there, in that ancient house, rooted in that quiet park, where the ivy and the moss have had time to mature, and the gnarled and warted elms, and the umbrageous oaks, stand deep in the fern and leaves of a hundred years; and where the sun-dial on the terrace has dumbly recorded for centuries that Time, which was as much the property of every Dedlock-- while he lasted--as the house and lands. Sir Leicester sits down in an easy-chair, opposing his repose and that of Chesney Wold to the restless flights of ironmasters. (xxviii, 394)

In this way both the structure and the setting of Bleak House draw deliberate attention to the fact of time, to the forces of history, and to the relationship between past and present. W.J. Harvey's metaphor of "pulsation," of a "constant expansion and contraction from the omniscient eye to Esther's single viewpoint,"[1] could be applied to the novel's temporal movement. Esther, writing in the present, looks back to a past in which the action takes place; yet the omniscient narrative directs our attention to a present in which Chancery and the other social evils are still very much alive. The self-consciousness of this technique suggests several observations on Dickens' method in Bleak House. The first, and most obvious, point is that Dickens has done nothing wrong, nothing comparable to his making Mr. Jingle refer to the French Revolution of 1830 in a novel set in 1827.[2] It follows from this that the

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1. "Chance and Design in Bleak House," Dickens and the Twentieth Century, ed. John Gross and Gabriel Pearson (1962), pp. 150-51.
2. P.P., ii, 11.

backdating of the action, and the tone of reminiscence in Esther's story, does not interfere with our response to Dickens' contemporary message--a fact partly explained by our acceptance of the novelist's need to set his novel back in time in order to allow for the development of his characters. Yet Hard Times has a similar temporal dimension without having the deliberate backward glance of Bleak House: it remains very firmly a novel of 1854, "for These Times." The time-scheme of Bleak House does not conflict with the novel's contemporaneity, I would suggest, chiefly because it is bound up with the kind of social criticism that Dickens is making. By bringing the two tenses together, by reminding his readers of an earlier period in a novel concerned with the problems of 1852, he is able to show that present problems, like the individuals they involve, have a history, that their origins lie in the past, and that the sins of the fathers are visited on the children and on the grand-children. The large temporal sweep of Bleak House brings home Dickens' point, that "both the world of fashion and the Court of Chancery are things of precedent and usage; over-sleeping Rip Van Winkles, who have played at strange games through a deal of thundery weather ..." (ii, 8).

In Chapter I, I suggested that Dickens' discovery of time reinforced his criticism of society by awakening him to a perception of individual and social change. This organic view of society is developed further in the double narrative of Bleak House. The combination of the public voice and the private history enabled Dickens to present a complex picture of a society whose injustices

are of such long growth that they have come to seem inevitable, and of course it is precisely this attitude of acceptance that he is attacking. In "A December Vision," an article written in December 1850, Dickens had criticised those who, recognising the need for social reform, shrug off their responsibility with the words, "'It is a great wrong--BUT IT WILL LAST MY TIME!'" They are rebuked by a "mighty Spirit," in a manner which recalls the prophetic Ghosts of the Christmas Books: "'Whosoever is a consenting party to a wrong, comforting himself with the base reflection that it will last his time, shall bear his portion of that wrong throughout ALL TIME. And, in the hour when he and I stand face to face, he shall surely know it, as my name is Death!'"[1] The same idea is embodied in the Court of Chancery in Bleak House, a symbol of all the deep-rooted wrongs which even well-intentioned people despair of setting to right; for "even those who have contemplated its history from the outermost circle of such evil, have been insensibly tempted into a loose way of letting bad things alone to take their own bad course, and a loose belief that if the world go wrong, it was, in some off-hand manner, never meant to go right" (i, 5).

The force of Dickens' satire on the law's delay derives from the conviction that these evils can, and should be remedied. A similar conviction attends his enthusiastic portrayal of the iron-master, Mr. Rouncewell, who embodies the transforming energies of the "moving age." He is conceived in the spirit, or something close

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1. H.W., II, 14 December 1850, 265-66; M.P., pp. 279-83.

to the spirit, of Dickens' opening address in Household Words, where he speaks of "the privilege of living in this summer-dawn of time."[1] Yet it would be wrong to conclude from this, as Ruskin did in 1870, that Dickens was "a pure modernist--a leader of the steam-whistle party par excellence--and he had no understanding of any power of antiquity ...His hero is essentially the ironmaster."[2] Bleak House continues to offer a complex picture of mid-Victorian England partly because of the delicacy with which Dickens balances the conflicting claims of past and present. If the vital forces of society are now associated with a new generation of aristocrats in the north, men like Mr. Rouncewell, and if the good characters move out to St. Alban's, leaving the Jellybys and Skimpoles and Turveydrops behind in London, fixed in the past; then there is also respect and compassion--even, perhaps, a certain nostalgia--for the chivalry which will die with Sir Leicester Dedlock. His story ends with his slow approach to the "mausoleum in the park" where his wife lies among the "dead-and-gone Dedlocks," who "take it very calmly, and have never been known to object" (lxvi, 872). The "stalwart man beside him, constant to his bridle-rein," is Trooper George, brother of Mr. Rouncewell, who has elected to stay behind the moving age and minister to the shattered grandeur of the old order.

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1. H.W., I, 30 March 1850, 1: M.P., p. 167.
2. Works, ed. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (1903-12), XXXVII (1909), 7; letter of 19 June 1870, to Charles Eliot Norton.

III

With Dickens' next novel we are brought abruptly to the present. Hard Times (1854) lacks the subtle modulation of past and present which characterises Bleak House; it is a novel "for These Times" (the subtitle to the 1854 edition), and all the energy of Dickens' rhetoric is now directed towards the contemporary scene. The social evils of Bleak House were the legacy of the past, in Hard Times they are created by the novi homines of mid-Victorian England: industrialists, trade unionists, utilitarians, Dickens has moved north to discover that Mr. Rouncewell has been replaced by Mr. Bounderby, and the difference between the two novels is partly suggested by this transition from something like unreserved admiration for the ironmaster who has worked his way up from the ranks, to the "Bully of humility," the "man who could never sufficiently vaunt himself a self-made man."[1]

There is a corresponding difference in Dickens' treatment of time in the two novels. Although certainly not the "first novel in which Dickens tries to trace with any degree of plausibility the processes by which people become what they are,"[2] Hard Times is very much concerned with time as a process, as the medium through which evil influences work themselves out. But the sense of the past, the historical awareness of society which is so marked in Bleak House, is quite absent from Hard Times, and it is this loss

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1. I, iv, 11. All references are to the Norton Critical Edition of Hard Times, ed. G.H. Ford and S. Monod (New York, 1966).
2. Wilson, Wound and the Bow, p. 58.

of retrospective dimension, I would suggest, which accounts for the harsh texture and lack of inwardness in the novel. In a letter of November 1854, Dickens wrote that the "idea" of Hard Times "laid hold of me by the throat in a very violent manner";[1] the suddenness of his inspiration and the urgency with which it presented itself to him makes this the most polemical of his novels, and the one least enriched by the hues of memory. Coketown is seen from the outside, in language pruned to a degree of sharpness which (with the exception of the satirical passages in Our Mutual Friend) is unique in Dickens' work. Here is his description of Gradgrind's house:

> A very regular feature on the face of the country Stone Lodge was. Not the least disguise toned down or shaded off that uncompromising fact in the landscape. A great square house, with a heavy portico darkening the principal windows, as its master's heavy brows overshadowed his eyes. A calculated, cast up, balanced, and proved house. Six windows on this side of the door, six on that side; a total of twelve in this wing, a total of twelve in the other wing; four-and-twenty carried over to the back wings. A lawn and garden and infant avenue, all ruled straight like a botanical account-book. (I, iii, 8)

It scarcely needs to be said how far this is from the picturesqueness of Bleak House or the somnolent grandeur of Chesney Wold. Strictly speaking, it is not a description at all but a figurative enactment of Gradgrind's attitude of mind, in which architecture is translated into "fact," into the language of mathematics and accountancy: "A calculated, cast up, balanced, and proved house." The conceit is worked out with considerable skill, and the clipped rhythms of the prose catch the no-nonsense efficiency of Gradgrind himself, yet

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1. N, II, 602; letter of 1 November 1854.

Dickens does not concede any visual quality to Stone Lodge which could be independent of the response he wants us to make towards its inhabitant. To a certain extent, of course, this passage is only an extreme example of a rhetorical device common in Dickens' work, his use of houses to suggest their owners' personalities; but Chesney Wold or Satis House have at least a detailed reality which lends complexity to their symbolic function. Stone Lodge has no such reality: at every point in the passage--and the same could be said of Dickens' descriptive prose throughout Hard Times--we are brought face to face with the author's peculiarly insistent moral and social intention.

A quality of insistency is indeed the keynote of Hard Times. Freud described it as "a cruel book that left him as if he had been rubbed all over by a hard brush."[1] All Dickens' novels create an autonomous world, analogous to the real world of Victorian England but ultimately independent of it; in the case of Hard Times the relationship between the real and the fictional world is particularly--one might almost say uncomfortably--close, and there are moments in the novel when Dickens seems to have wanted to break down the distinction, to document his attack on factualism by referring to the "facts" of the real world. Thus, in a cancelled passage in Book I, Chapter xiii, Stephen Blackpool refers to Rachael's little sister "'Wi' her child arm tore off afore thy face!,'" to which Dickens added a footnote on the proof-sheet, "See Household Words vol. IX page 224, article entitled GROUND IN THE MILL."[2] The

1. Ernest Jones, Sigmund Freud: Life and Work, I (1953), 190.
2. See R.B. Woodings, "A Cancelled Passage in Hard Times," Dickensian, LX (1964), 42-3; also H.T., p. 252.

note was not published, of course, the passage having been cancelled, but the impulse is characteristic of the polemical spirit in which Hard Times is written. The novel was published in Household Words, and as we shall see brings together many of the topics on which Dickens and his contributors had been writing articles. For this reason it has always appealed to those, like Ruskin and Shaw, whose interest in Dickens is strongly social: "all of them," Ruskin wrote of Dickens' novels in Unto this Last, "but especially Hard Times, should be studied with close and earnest care by persons interested in social questions."[1]

Hard Times, then, occupies a special place in the view of Dickens' development for which I have argued in this study. As a novel "for These Times," it stands at the opposite end of the spectrum from David Copperfield, Bleak House, Little Dorrit, and Great Expectations--works in which Dickens draws extensively upon his memory of the past. Hard Times lacks the backward glance, the autobiographical resonance; its focus is strictly contemporary. And since it is in many ways the culmination of Dickens' "topical" reformist phase in the early eighteen-fifties, it raises in a particulately acute form certain questions which must be faced by the student of Dickens as a social critic. If, as Dr. Leavis has argued, Dickens chose to confront "certain key characteristics of Victorian civilisation" in this novel, characteristics which we recognise as being peculiar to the mid-Victorian scene, then

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1. Works, XVII (1905), 31n.

how valuable is his record?[1] More precisely, how accurate is his response to emergent features of his society? Can his imaginative critique of contemporary life survive the descent to detail which its polemical spirit seems to invoke?

These issues have recently been brought to a sharp focus by John Holloway, in an article which questions Dr. Leavis' judgment that "in Hard Times [Dickens] is for once possessed by a comprehensive vision, one in which the inhumanities of Victorian civilisation are seen as fostered and sanctioned by a hard philosophy, the aggressive formulation of an inhumane spirit."[2] "Hard Times: A History and a Criticism" is an attempt to refute Leavis in terms of Dickens' understanding of his society, and from it the novel emerges, not as a radical analysis of Victorian materialism, but as the work of a blustering and sentimental middle-brow, whose attitude on social matters "partook a little of the shallowness of the merely topical, and the defects of the bourgeois ...Philistine."[3] Setting out "to trace the exact contour of significance which ran for Dickens himself, as he wrote the book, through the material he handled," Holloway arrives at the conclusion that Dickens "stood much too near to what he criticised in the novel, for his criticism to reach a fundamental level."[4] This unorthodox position is supported by an apparently impressive density of documentation from contemporary writing and Dickens'

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1. The Great Tradition (1948), p. 20.
2. Leavis, Great Tradition, p. 228; Holloway, "Hard Times: A History and a Criticism," in Dickens and the Twentieth Century, pp. 159-74.
3. Holloway, pp. 169-70.
4. Holloway, pp. 159, 166.

own journalism, speeches, and correspondence; and judging from the approving references the article has received from some scholars of the period, it would seem that Holloway has already replaced Leavis as the authority in this critical argument. Ada Nisbet, for example, praises Holloway for his "sound corrective to Leavis' closet-reading of Hard Times ...an example of the kind of clear-visioned judgment that can result from a careful job of research into what Dickens had been reading, writing, and saying at the time he was 'creating' a piece of fiction."[1] One recent critic of the Victorian social novel has even gone so far as to confess that he does not "see how many of his [Holloway's] strictures can be answered."[2]

The debate is an important one, for behind the immediate critical questions raised lies the larger issue of Dickens' whole response to the life of his times. With the possible exception of The Chimes, Hard Times represents Dickens' most urgently topical work, and it is therefore in many ways a test case for our assumptions about his social perception; if Holloway is right, and these assumptions cannot survive the descent to detail, then those of us who have followed Leavis' lead over this novel have seriously exaggerated the value of the insight it offers. But the finality with which Holloway passes his judgment does not strike me as being altogether justified by the evidence he brings in support of it, and

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1. "Charles Dickens," Victorian Fiction: a Guide to Research, ed. Lionel Stevenson (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), p. 83.
2. John Lucas, "Mrs. Gaskell and Brotherhood," in Tradition and Tolerance in Nineteenth-Century Fiction (1966), p. 176.

there is reason to suppose in this case that the question of Dickens' awareness of contemporary Victorian society may seem to be closed before, in a sense, it has been properly aired. Far from having exhausted the background information, I do not think Holloway has investigated it deeply enough.

He criticises Dickens for his handling of two contemporary issues, neither of them, strictly speaking, quite central to the theme of Hard Times. After establishing the point that Mr. Gradgrind is a "Manchester School" political economist and after citing parallel instances of naive factualism in the writings of J.R. McCulloch and Charles Knight, Holloway goes on to show that the Department of Practical Art, whose views are satirised in the second chapter of the novel, was an enlightened contemporary movement dedicated (among other things) to curing mid-Victorian design of its tendency towards excessive representationalism.[1] It is true that, by including the Marlborough House reformers in a satire on utilitarianism, Dickens probably misrepresented their aims, and it may also be true that "through [Gottfried] Semper, the circle which Dickens satirised counts among the forerunners of the Bauhaus."[2] But to trace this sort of intellectual genealogy is surely an unnecessarily ponderous way of accounting for what is, after all, an incidental topicality of almost esoteric appeal: the "third gentleman" never appears again, and there can have been few readers of Hard Times who recognised in this figure Dickens' friend Henry Cole, the pioneer of

1. See also K.J. Fielding, "Charles Dickens and the Department of Practical Art," Modern Language Review, XLVIII (1953), 270-77.
2. Holloway, p. 165.

the Marlborough House movement. Philip Collins put the matter in its right perspective when he said that "this is not the only example of his using a novel for what was virtually a private joke."[1]

Holloway's second criticism is more substantial, if only because industrial relations play a more prominent part in the novel than contemporary design. With reference to the new industry in the North, he says that Dickens shared "the somewhat naive enthusiasms, and with them to some extent the brusque middle-class hostilities and presumptions of those whom he thought he was criticising,"[2] and supports this statement with references to articles which appeared at the time in Household Words. In fact, of the three pieces to which Holloway refers only one, "On Strike," was written by Dickens; the other two, which give such evidence of those "brusque middle-class hostilities and presumptions," were the work of independent contributors, as any copy of the surviving Household Words Contributors' Book would have revealed readily.

This is not to deny that in choosing the stump-orator Slackbridge as his union leader, Dickens missed an opportunity to incorporate into Hard Times those complex and challenging features of the wages movement he had observed at first hand in his visit to Preston.[3] But our concern here is with Dickens' awareness of

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1. Dickens and Education, p. 157.
2. Holloway, p. 166.
3. For a discussion of Dickens and the Preston Strike, see K.J. Fielding, "The Battle for Preston," Dickensian, L (1954), 159-62; and Geoffrey Carnall, "Dickens, Mrs. Gaskell, and the Preston Strike," Victorian Studies, VIII (1964), 31-48. It is easy to [Contd.

these features in his society, and it is positively misleading to confound his sensible and balanced assessment of the Preston dispute with the uncritical accounts of industrial achievement to be found in the pages of his periodical at this time. Household Words is an uneven journal, and if anyone wishes to get a measure of the quality of Dickens' personal contributions, he has only to compare "On Strike" (11 February 1854) with James Lowe's article on the same subject two months earlier, "Locked Out"; the latter abounds in examples of the middle-class prejudice Holloway detects in Dickens--"Ignorance of the most deplorable kind is at the root of all this sort of strife and demoralising misery," and so on.[1] Lowe's tone is condescending and heavy-handed--"Here ...do the mob-orators appear in times of trouble and contention to excite, with their highly spiced eloquence, the thoughtless crowd"[2]--and his account fails miserably for a lack of that very quality which Dickens possessed in abundance, an eye for significant detail.

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overestimate the part the Preston Strike played in the genesis of Hard Times, and Dickens himself was emphatic on this point: before the novel started to appear, the Illustrated London News hinted that Dickens' visit to Preston had helped to shape his new story, an inference which he strongly denied in a letter to the editor, Peter Cunningham: "The title was many weeks old, and chapters of the story were written, before I went to Preston or thought about the present strike. The mischief of such a statement is twofold. First, it encourages the public to believe in the possibility that books are produced in that very sudden and cavalier manner ...and secondly in this instance it has this bearing: it localises ...a story which has a direct purpose in reference to the working people all over England, and it will cause, as I know by former experience, characters to be fitted on to individuals whom I never saw or heard of in my life" (N, II, 546).

1. H.W., VIII, 10 December 1853, 348.
2. Lowe, pp. 345-46.

"On Strike" remains a primary source of information about the Preston Strike because of its close, sympathetic observation of daily life during the lock-out: the dignity of the men during a delegates' meeting, the placards at the street corners ("The Masters' placards were not torn down or disfigured, but were being read quite as attentively as those on the opposite side"[1]), the self-discipline displayed by the strikers while being paid. It is not Dickens' solution (arbitration) which deserves our attention here, but the sympathy inherent in the texture of his writing; and it is only by neglecting this, and by ignoring the evidence of the Household Words Contributors' Book, that Holloway's charge of middle-class prejudice can be sustained.

The Coketown scenes in Hard Times were not modelled directly upon Dickens' Preston experience, and his own statement to this effect[2] suggests the existence of an underlying preoccupation, in relation to which the industrial passages were properly incidental. The Westminster Review recognised this at the time, when it expressed a dissatisfaction with the fact that, having set his novel in the industrial North, Dickens should have made so little of such richly topical matter as the recent strikes. He had, it was true, dealt in part with the "inner life of these great movements," but "this purpose is subordinated and made incidental to another, which is to exhibit the evil effects of an exclusive education of the

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1. H.W., VIII, 11 February 1854, 556.
2. See above, p. 105, note 3.

intellect, without a due cultivation of the finer feelings of the heart and the fancy. We suppose it is in anticipation of some change in the present educational system for one that shall attempt to kill 'outright the robber Fancy,' that Mr. Dickens launches forth his protest, for we are not aware of such a system being in operation anywhere in England."[1]

The reviewer was right to see the prominent part education plays in the novel. If, as most readers would agree, Hard Times is about an attitude of mind which we define, however loosely and inaccurately, as utilitarianism, then the substance of the book is a testing of this "philosophy," and specifically of its educational pretensions. The novel turns upon the irony implicit in the different concepts of education: the narrow schooling of Gradgrind and M'Choakumchild, and the self-vaunting ignorance of Bounderby which so strangely complements it, are seen to issue in an ultimate emotional sterility. The structure of the book enacts this process, which is emphasised by the divisions Dickens made for volume publication--"Sowing," "Reaping," and "Garnering." Education is both the focus of Gradgrind's public energies, his model school, and the measure of his private failure; it is the upbringing he has prescribed for his children which finally recoils upon him, and brings about the climactic moment of recognition at the end of the second book: "And he laid her down there, and saw the pride of his heart and the triumph of his system, lying, an insensible heap, at his feet" (II, xii, 167). Here utilitarianism and education are

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1. Westminster Review, N.S. VI (1854), 605.

seen to go together in a special way, one that suggests a specific satiric intention more fundamental to the scheme of the book than the overt topicalities which have claimed the attention of recent scholarship. Dickens' view on trade unionism and design have a decided interest, but if we wish to determine the level at which he is criticising his society in Hard Times, we must surely begin with what is central to the issue--with his understanding of the contemporary manifestations of utilitarianism in mid-Victorian England.

IV

The schoolroom satire in the novel has been well documented recently and an excellent summary of the issues can be found in Philip Collins' Dickens and Education. We know that in Mr. M'Choakumchild Dickens was embodying the more disturbing tendencies contemporary observers had noted in the products of the recently constituted Teacher Training Colleges; and it is also probable that his criticism of a fact-dominated classroom system owed a good deal to his contact, through Miss Coutts, with the movement for the teaching of "Common Things," an attempt to give useful practical knowledge to the children of the poor, which was started by the Dean of Hereford and inaugurated at a meeting held at Winchester in

December 1853.[1] But the important feature of the educational background still remains largely unexplained; the precise nature of Mr. Gradgrind's school, and in particular the part played in the curriculum by political economy. For here, surely, there is an explicit linkage between economic doctrine and educational practice:

> M'Choakumchild reported that [Sissy] had a very dense head for figures ...that she would burst into tears on being required (by the mental process) immediately to name the cost of two hundred and forty-seven muslin caps at fourteen-pence half-penny ...that after eight weeks of induction into the elements of Political Economy, she had only yesterday been set right by a prattler three feet high, for returning to the question, "What is the first principle of this science?" the absurd answer, "To do unto others as I would that they should do unto me." (I, ix, 42-3)

Were there such schools in which the "elements of Political Economy" were taught? The Westminster Review, which might have been expected to know of such matters, thought not: "If there are Gradgrind schools, they are not sufficiently numerous to be generally known."[2] Is this merely an uneasy linkage of two themes, an example of that "amiable but casual grasp of the realities" for which Holloway criticises Dickens in Hard Times?[3]

The answer is that Dickens was right and the Westminster Review wrong: elementary schools of the Gradgrind variety did exist at this

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1. Collins, pp. 144-59. For a discussion of Dickens' relation to the "Common Things" movement, see K.J. Fielding, "'Women in the Home': an article which Dickens did not write," Dickensian, XLVII (1951), 140-42; see also the same writer's article on "Hard Times and Common Things," in Imagined Worlds: Essays on some English Novels and Novelists in Honour of John Butt, ed. Maynard Mack and Ian Gregor (1968), pp. 183-203. Here the story is told in greater detail, especially with regard to attacks on the teaching of "facts." Certainly Dickens was not alone in his criticism.
2. VI (1854), 605.
3. Holloway, p. 165.

time, and though they were a small and now largely forgotten area of nineteenth-century education, they do constitute a remarkable instance of the complex workings of practical utilitarianism in Victorian England. Dickens' treatment of such schools in Hard Times shows a quality of insight, a sensitivity to emergent features of his society, for which he has not always had credit. In this case topicality and theme are at one.

> "If you buy a loaf, what do you give for it?" "Money." "What is money?"--From this point we were carried through a series of questions on the social relations that exist in civilised communities. The boys readily defined and explained such terms as wealth, capital, wages, labour; showed by a train of reasoning their perfect comprehension of the principle that governs our common divisions of labour, and the relative rewards of toil....A little fellow with light flaxen hair, one of the youngest in the class, was quite a luminary upon all points that were mooted.... Where others hesitated, he answered boldly and correctly; where others knew their ground, he answered with them in his own way....There was not a question he did not answer, and there was not one of his answers that was not clearly and correctly given. It was a touch of the very pleasantest comedy, when this imperturbable young philosopher got the class over a difficult case, by suggesting the line of conduct which a capitalist would probably pursue in given circumstances. A young man with his business head--he is eleven years old--and his knowledge of the laws that regulate prices and other matters in the country, ought to be in Parliament.

This is not, though it reads like it, an excerpt from Mr. Gradgrind's classroom notes on the performance of Bitzer under M'Choakumchild. It comes, in fact, from an article on the Birkbeck Schools, "Rational Schools," which appeared in Household Words over a year before the start of Hard Times, and the education system there described clearly contradicts the supposition of the Westminster

Review that Gradgrind schools did not exist.[1]

The Birkbeck Schools which Henry Morley visited were founded by William Ellis, the utilitarian and friend of John Stuart Mill.[2] For sixpence a week, the children of the poor were offered an education which was expressly designed to equip them for their economic and social function in an industrial society. The first school of this kind was opened in the Lecture Theatre of the London Mechanics' Institution on 17 July 1848, where, in addition to the normal subjects, boys from the age of seven upwards were taught, as the Prospectus put it, "the laws of their own organisation, in order that they may understand how much their health, general energy, physical happiness, and length of life, are dependent on their own conduct; also with the laws of SOCIAL ECONOMY, that they may

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1. "Rational Schools," H.W., VI, 25 December 1852, 337-42. Articles in Household Words were anonymous, but their authorship can be determined from copies of the Contributors' Book. This was written by Henry Morley (1822-94), a frequent contributor to this journal and to its successor, All The Year Round. Morley was well equipped to write on educational matters. Educated at English private schools and at a Moravian school in Neuwied, he abandoned a career in medicine for schoolteaching, and kept schools in Manchester and Liscard before taking up a post on the staff of Household Words. The evidence suggests that Morley was influenced by Dickens, and that in the early stages of his connection with Household Words he had to adapt his work to suit a firm editorial policy; his contributions were "frequently altered," and eventually he decided "to find out what was wanted at the office, and to supply that" (H.S. Solly, Life of Henry Morley [1898], pp. 154, 174), Dickens certainly read the article, but does not seem to have taken exception at the time to its generally approving tone, perhaps because his energies were absorbed in preparing the number for publication. It was the Christmas issue, the editor, W.H. Wills, was ill, and he had the whole paper to correct--"an awful one for the amount of correction required" (R.C. Lehmann, Charles Dickens as Editor [1912], p. 93).
2. Mill referred to Ellis in his Autobiography as "an original thinker in the field of political economy, now honourably known by his apostolic exertions for the improvement of education" (World's Classics edition [1963], p. 68).

properly understand their own position in Society, and their duties towards it."[1]

The history of such schools is a strange and interesting chapter in the movement for popular education in Victorian England. To many Victorians, education was a means of social control; in the face of revolutions on the Continent and unrest at home it became imperative that the people be taught respect for the inevitable community of interest that bound a commercial society together. It was in terms like these that Ellis and men like him justified their educational activities:

> Among other causes of this unfavourable condition of European society may be reckoned the imperfect education of the great body of the people. In many countries their instruction has been greatly neglected, and even in those in which the best efforts have been made to teach them, the knowledge imparted has rarely embraced an exposition of the natural laws by which individual and social wellbeing is determined. Moreover they have not been trained to submit, in their practical conduct, to the requirements of these laws, as necessary conditions of propperity.[2]

These "natural laws" were axiomatic to many Victorians, and they went unquestioned: Gradgrind is in nothing more typical of his age than in the naive, apostolic zeal with which he advances his favourite theories.[3]

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1. W.M. Williams, The Birkbeck School, London, Mechanics' Institution (1848), p. 1. This circular letter announced the opening of the original Birkbeck School in the London Mechanics' Institution.

2. Prospectus of a School for the Secular Education of Boys (Edinburgh, 1848), p. 1.

3. In his recent study of popular education, J.F.C. Harrison has commented interestingly on the uncritical acceptance of economic theory by Victorian educationists: "To an age which was firmly in the grip of economic teachings so attractive to the rising middle-classes as those of Adam Smith, Ricardo, and Malthus, it seemed mere obtuseness to refuse to acknowledge the practical force of these theories when once they had been logically explained. Their very 'naturalness' removed them from the realm [Contd.

Such a man was William Ellis. When The Times reviewed Mill's Autobiography on 10 November 1873, Ellis was referred to as "the founder, as he may be called, of social science."[1] Like Gradgrind, his belief in the truths of political economy was absolute, and he made it the purpose of his life to apply them to popular education. His biographer, E.K. Blyth, writes that:

> His object was to prove by practical experience that the science of social wellbeing, although by the vast majority of educators looked on as appertaining to political economy, and therefore abstruse and difficult to understand, might be treated in a simple and popular manner, and brought down to the comprehension of children of the ordinary school age. His success was such as to surprise himself, and a very short experience conclusively established that the truths of Social Economy can not only be understood and appreciated, but when properly taught prove to be a subject of intense and absorbing interest.[2]

His educational purpose distinguished him from other political economists:

> The very thought of influencing human beings in favour of obedience to economic laws is not found, even in the treatises of the most eminent of earlier writers; with Ellis the pervading idea which guides and animates every page of his works is to elicit from those laws the strongest possible stimulus to right conduct....As developed by Ellis, social economy is a union of the principles of political economy as understood by his predecessors, with those of morals and religion. Its purpose is to instil motives of action, adapted to the phenomena of existing society, such as can alone effect permanent improvement in the welfare of the people.[3]

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of argument and doubt; they were truths to be explained and accepted, not hypotheses to be debated. The problem was one of communication, of how to disseminate most effectively these truths among the working classes" (Learning and Living 1790-1960 [1961], p. 81).

1. p. 6.
2. Life of William Ellis (1889), p. 80.
3. Blyth, p. 127.

"Social Economy" is indeed the key to Ellis's brand of utilitarianism. In his search for the right name to describe the practical education he was trying to establish, he had to abandon "Political Economy" because "he found that many people failed to understand by it the teaching and training of his pupils in the various qualities which lie at the base of all social wellbeing--such as industry, knowledge, skill, economy, temperance, respect for property, and forethought, especially parental forethought."[1]

Ellis worked in many ways to establish the science of social economy in the school curriculum. Apart from the original in the London Mechanics' Institution, he founded six other Birkbeck Schools in London between 1849 and 1852, and gave liberal help and financial assistance towards the establishment of many similar schools. The most notable of these was perhaps the Williams' Secular School in Edinburgh, which was set up in 1848 by his friend George Combe. In all schools of this kind, social economy was taught from Ellis's own textbooks--Outlines of Social Economy (1846), Introduction to the Study of the Social Sciences (1849), Progressive Lessons in Social Science (1850), and Lessons on the Phenomena of Industrial Life, which appeared under the editorship of the Dean of Hereford in 1854.

The system was standard throughout the Birkbeck Schools, and it is possible to derive a fair idea of Ellis's method from any account by a fair-minded observer. Morley's article is substantial, and it has the added advantage over the textbooks and the official

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1. Blyth, pp. 72-73.

reports in that it conveys something of the everyday flavour of life in a Birkbeck School. Preparation started early, with object-lessons for the youngest class of six- and seven-year-olds: "'This little thing in my pocket,' the teacher continued, 'has not much power by itself, but when many of the same kind come together, they can do great deeds. A number of them have assembled lately to build handsome monuments to a great man, whose name you all ought to know, who made the penny loaf bigger than it used to be--do you know what great man that was?'"[1] This passage, reminiscent in tone of a similar exchange between Paul Dombey and his father in Dombey and Son, is typical of the object-lesson as it was used in the Birkbeck Schools: training in definition spiced, wherever possible, with a little preliminary economics. The "great man" in question is Sir Robert Peel, and the object is of course a penny, which the children then proceed to analyse in terms of its properties, deciding among themselves that copper is "malleable," "tenacious," "inorganic," and so forth. The object-lesson was the basic foundation on which later education was built, and served, as the First Annual Report of the Williams' School put it, "to prepare the children for those systematic courses of instruction in the sciences, which constitute the chief business of the advanced classes."[2] The physiological object-lesson was a particular favourite (one recalls Bitzer's definition of the horse), its function being only partly to educate

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1. H.W., VI, 337-38.
2. First Annual Report of the Williams' Secular School (Edinburgh, 1850), p. 6.

the children in health and hygiene; in practice, as Dickens knew, it helped to consolidate their habits of classification and, more significantly, served as an introduction to self-evident natural laws which led on to equally "natural" laws of economics. This process of indoctrination is most apparent in contemporary accounts of examinations: "The same class went through an object-lesson on wool, and described its various qualities, its uses to the sheep and to the man, and the processes of spinning and weaving. Their statement that wool grows on the sheep and clothes it, but that man is born without covering and must make clothes for himself, led to an exposition of the necessity of skill and industry to man."[1] The other sciences served the same end, and one can safely assume that this was one of the purposes behind the young Gradgrinds' scientific "cabinets"--"They had a little conchological cabinet, and a little metallurgical cabinet, and a little mineralogical cabinet; and the specimens were all arranged and labelled." (I, iii, 8).

The object-lesson was a preparation for the more advanced classes, where the older boys received what was in effect a thorough grounding in the principles of political economy, with an explicit view to their future status as operatives and workers:

> What must be the practical effect of teaching the facts that concern social welfare to such children, let a scrap or two out of their present lesson testify. "What are wages?" Answers vary in form: "The reward of labour," "Capital employed to purchase labour," and so forth. "When you become men, and work, and receive wages, will you all receive

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1. The Scotsman, 27 July 1849; reprinted in First Annual Report, p. 16.

> the same amount of money for your labour?"--"No, very different."--"Why different?"--"The price paid for labour will depend among other things upon the value of it, and that differs in different people."[1]

Again, the system of persuasion is revealed most clearly in the examinations, when the press and public were invited to attend and the children were, presumably, on their best behaviour. The following passage is from a record of such an examination in the Williams' School, and it is interesting to note the use of the word "natural": this adjective appears constantly in the writings of Ellis and his apologists, and nearly always serves to underline, as it does here, the inevitability of the economic dogma which the Birkbeck educationists were trying to inculcate.[2]

> Does the capitalist receive from the labourer an exact equivalent of the wages he gives him, or something more?--Something more.
> What do you call this something more?--Profit.
> Is it to the advantage of the labourer, as well as the capitalist, that the capitalist should receive a profit?--Yes.
> What induces some men to save more than they intend to consume themselves?--The hope of profit.
> If there were no hope of profit, would men be likely to make great stores beyond what they need for themselves?--No.
> What, then, would become of those who had stored up nothing?--They would starve.
> Is the labourer, then, who has no store, dependent on the capitalist?--Yes.
> Is this the result of a natural or an artificial law?--Of a natural law.
> What natural law?--That we must subsist on the produce of former labour.[3]

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1. H.W., VI, 339.
2. It is difficult at this distance to appreciate just how sacrosanct these economic "laws" were to many Victorians. As late as 1877 E.P. Whipple could still criticise Hard Times from the standpoint of the very assumptions Dickens was challenging--"The time will come when it will be as intellectually discreditable for an educated person to engage in a crusade against the established laws of political economy as in a crusade against the established laws of the physical universe" (Atlantic Monthly, XXXIX [1877], 353).
3. Second Annual Report of the Williams' Secular School (Edinburgh, 1851), p. 30.

Such questioning by the teacher may recall M'Choakumchild's rough promptings, and indeed a comparison of Ellis's textbooks with the relevant passages in Hard Times reveals how accurately Dickens has caught the dominant note of interrogation. Particularly impressive is his awareness of the Birkbeck educationists' tendency to manufacture economic puzzles out of instances of human loss and natural disaster. "If all the ships insured at a marine insurance office were to be lost, what would be the consequence to the office, and what to the insured?"--this, from Lesson Thirty-one of Ellis's Progressive Lessons in Social Science, is strikingly reminiscent of M'Choakumchild's problem (as reported by Sissy): "'And I find ... that in a given time a hundred thousand persons went to sea on long voyages, and only five hundred of them were drowned or burnt to death. What is the percentage?'" (I, ix, 44).

Ellis's textbooks formed the basis for this sort of classroom discussion, but a glance at the catalogue of a Birkbeck School library shows something of the extent and determination of the influence Dickens was combating: G.L. Craik's The Pursuit of Knowledge under Difficulties (2 vols., 1830, 31), of course, and the usual run of "useful knowledge" works--the Rev. W. Bingley's Useful Knowledge (3 vols., 1816), Chambers's Information for the People (ed. W. & R. Chambers, 2 vols., Edinburgh, 1842), and the same publishers' Papers for the People (12 vols., Edinburgh, 1850-51). The contemporary taste for scientific popularisation is reflected in Mrs. J. Marcet's Conversations on Chemistry (2 vols., 1806) and

Jeremiah Joyce's Scientific Dialogues (7 vols., 1809), which take their place alongside George Combe's Elements of Phrenology (Edinburgh, 1824). Predictably enough, works of an economic and didactic nature were well represented, ranging from The Domestic Economist (ed. G.W. Johnson, 1850), and The Family Economist (1848-53), to the cautionary tales of Mrs. Sherwood (Mary Martha Butt)--Duty is Safety; or Troublesome Tom (in The Holiday Keepsake, 1841), and Think before you Act (in The Juvenile Forget-me-not, 1841).[1] It is a characteristic selection, and supports Richard Altick's contention that "the governing middle class sought to withhold from the newly literate multitude the sort of reading that Herschel and Dickens insisted they needed above all--reading that would give them simple pleasure after a hard day's work....The very diversity of these stratagems, beginning with the bleak pedagogy of the elementary schoolroom, is testimony to the pervasiveness of the utilitarian outlook in Victorian society."[2]

To balance this somewhat grim picture, it should be said on the other side that (the subject of their teachings apart) the Birkbeck educationists showed a concern with educational technique which was in many ways commendable. Ellis and his followers always claimed that their brand of political economy could not only be understood by young children, but positively enjoyed by them as well, and allowing for the exaggeration which usually attends such claims,[3]

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1. Second Report, pp. 34-5. I have cited these works in the first edition, although of course most of them went through numerous cheap reprints.
2. The English Common Reader (Chicago, 1957), p. 140.
3. The Annual Reports stress the children's "love of the school," the earnestness with which they pursue their studies being so

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there is no evidence from contemporary accounts to contradict this. Learning by rote was kept to a minimum, and corporal punishment was virtually abolished; even their practicality had its positive aspect, and the constant reference to reality which underlay even the object-lesson showed recognition of an essential principle in elementary education. Moreover, through his friendship with the Dean of Hereford, Ellis was in direct contact with the "Common Things" movement, of which Dickens approved, and there is evidence of this involvement in the part practical science--and for the girls, domestic science--played in the daily curriculum.[1]

Yet for all this it is difficult to deny the justice of the charge Dickens is making against these schools in Hard Times. Their concern with educational method does not obscure the fact that what men like Ellis are about here is the propagation of an economic orthodoxy; and if indoctrination seems too harsh a word to describe their process of persuasion, then one withholds it only out of a sense of the naive and unquestioning idealism which could lead them to accept such an exclusively economic formulation of life in an industrial civilisation. For the Birkbeck system was, in essence, an education contrived to teach the poor their place, and this purpose comes through all the more strongly in a generally approving account like Morley's:

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extreme "as to require considerable vigilance, on the part of the teachers, to prevent over-exercise of the brain" (First Report, p. 11).

1. "The teaching of the philosophy of 'common things', which has recently been advocated so ably by Lord Ashburton, has thus been a leading object in this School from its commencement" (Prospectus of the Williams' Secular School [Edinburgh, 1854], p. 2).

> The relation between capital and population, competition and the rise and fall of wages, were [sic] discussed in the same familiar way. Throughout the lesson, it was evident that the boys were becoming grounded in the truths that regulate the life before them, and that they knew it. They were learning how they must work, and why they must work....Fluctuations of wages that depend on natural causes they were taught to understand and accept as necessary facts, when they might hereafter occur within their own experience. And thus in fact these boys were learning what work means, were trained to help themselves, and rescued from the unhappy crowd that yet for many years to come will act to its own hurt under the guidance of pot-house orators and pot-house prints. The little flaxen-headed statesman ... will, with Heaven's leave, grow up to be a workman skilful, industrious, sober, honest and punctual.[1]

Hard Times demonstrates how one "little flaxen-headed statesman" could grow up, under an identical system of education, to be grovelling, selfish, and deceitful; and in the end to thwart his benefactor with the words of the economic dogma he had learned so accurately at school: "'I beg your pardon for interrupting you, Sir,' returned Bitzer, 'but I am sure you know that the whole social system is a question of self-interest. What you must always appeal to, is a person's self-interest....I was brought up in that catechism when I was very young, Sir, as you are aware'" (III, viii, 218). With the example of Ellis and others before him, Dickens' presentation of the moral and emotional implications of such a narrowly conceived education does not seem exaggerated.

V

There was, however, one reader who felt that Dickens had mis-

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1. H.W., VI, 339-40.

represented the Birkbeck Schools, and who voiced his resentment at the time, while the novel was still appearing weekly in Household Words. Despite all that has been written about Hard Times and its relation to Victorian England, this significant contemporary criticism has been completely overlooked; yet it has an important bearing on any discussion of the educational satire, for it is the response of a man who was directly and intimately involved in the movement Dickens was attacking. Dr. William Ballantyne Hodgson, the political economist and educational reformer, was a close friend of William Ellis and, until his appointment in 1871 to the new chair of Political Economy at Edinburgh University, a fellow-propagandist for the cause of economic science in education. It was on this subject, "The Importance of the Study of Economic Science as a Branch of Education for All Classes," that he delivered a lecture to the Royal Institution on 10 June 1854, in which he expressed his own "deep regret" that Dickens "should have lent his great genius and name to the discrediting of the subject whose claims I now advocate."[1]

Hodgson's reactions to Hard Times are interesting, and worth examining in some detail. Dickens' descriptions, he said, "are just as like to real Economic Science as 'statistics' are to 'stutterings,' two words which he makes one of his characters not very naturally confound"; and he then went on to cite the passage in the first chapter of Book Two, in which we are told that Bitzer

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1. Lectures on Education delivered at the Royal Institution of Great Britain (1855), p. 299.

had his mother shut up in the workhouse on an annual allowance of half a pound of tea:

> Here Economic Science, which so strongly enforces parental duty, is given out as discouraging its moral if not economic correlative--filial duty. But where do economists represent this maxim as the whole duty of man? Their business is to treat of man in his industrial capacity and relations; they do not presume to deal with his other capacities and relations, except by showing what must be done in their sphere to enable any duties whatever to be discharged.[1]

Again, in Bitzer's smug repudiation of marriage in the same chapter, Hodgson saw an attack on the doctrine of parental restraint so earnestly advocated by his friend Ellis:

> Does this mean that men or women ought to rush blindly into the position of parents, without thinking or caring whether their children can be supported by their industry, or must be a burden on that of society at large? If not, on what ground is prudent hesitation, in assuming the most solemn of all human responsibilities, a subject for ridicule and censure? Is the condition of the people to be improved by greater or by less laxity in this respect?
>
> But not merely are we told that this teaching (which, by the way, scarcely exists in any but a very few schools) tends to selfishness, and the merging of the community in the individual; it has, it seems, also, a quite opposite tendency to merge the individual in the community, by accustoming the mind to dwell wholly on averages. Thus, if in a city of a million of inhabitants, twenty-five are starved to death annually in the streets, or if of 100,000 persons who go to sea, 500 are drowned or burned to death, we are led to believe that Economic Science disregards these miseries, because they are exceptional, and because the average is so greatly the other way! Now, though in comparison of two countries, or two periods, such averages are indispensable, Economic Science practically teaches everywhere to analyse the collective result into its constituent elements,--in a word, to individualise.... Besides it is a fundamental error to confound mere statistics with economic science, which deals with facts only to establish their connections by way of cause and effect, and to interpret them by law.
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> But were it otherwise, with what justice can economic instruction be charged with destroying imagination, by the

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1. Hodgson, pp. 300-301.

> utilitarian teaching of "stubborn facts." Why should either exclude the other? I can see no incompatibility between the two. By all means let us have poetry, but first let us have our daily bread, even though man is not fed by that alone.[1]

Hodgson concluded this section of his lecture with the confession that he had entered on it "with pain, and only from a strong sense of duty. The public mind, alas!, is not enlightened enough to render such writing harmless."[2] In a sense, his exasperation is understandable. Through his work with the Liverpool Mechanics' Institute, he had met Dickens, and later corresponded with him on educational matters;[3] he must have been puzzled that the great novelist's sympathy with social questions did not extend to the work of his friend Ellis, and hurt by the vivid and dramatic treatment of economic science in the novel. But his reaction is revealing.

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1. Hodgson, pp. 302-304. The schools to which he refers are of course those of his friend Ellis, about whom he writes in an Appendix: "the free action of the instructed individual is the true guarantee for the well-being of the community. To reduce this conviction to practice no one has yet done so much as Mr. William Ellis--the munificent patron of the Birkbeck Schools" (p. 316).
2. Hodgson, p. 304.
3. Dickens spoke at a soirée of the Liverpool Mechanics' Institute on 26 Feb. 1844; see Speeches, p. 52. Hodgson became Secretary to the Institute in 1839, and Principal in 1844; he wrote to Dickens in 1847, expressing his views on George Combe's pamphlet, Remarks on National Education. Dickens' reply gives an indication of the extent of his involvement in the educational issues of the age: "Your criticism of Coombe's [sic] pamphlet is as justly felt as it is earnestly and strongly written. I undergo more astonishment and disgust in connection with that question of education almost every day of my life than is awakened in me by any other member of the whole magazine of social monsters that are walking about in these times" (N, II, 27-28).

What really troubles Hodgson about Hard Times is the character of Bitzer, as well it might. It is quite true, as he maintains, that economic science does not teach celibacy or filial cruelty; but it is equally true that the purpose of the science, as understood by Ellis, was to inculcate certain laws of social organisation (it "deals with facts only to establish their connections by way of cause and effect, and to interpret them by law"). Hodgson is blind to the ambiguity of his position: on the one hand he is extolling the desirability of teaching children the truths, as he sees them, of economic science; and on the other criticising Dickens for depicting a model pupil who applies these truths as laws indeed. Yet this was surely an inevitable consequence of teaching simplified economics to the very young. Bitzer represented a tendency in their system which men like Ellis and Hodgson did not care to admit--the readiness with which economic "truths" were taken up by children who, seeing in their acceptance a means of winning the approval of their elders, were understandably content to learn and apply them literally. The model pupil was at once the pride of the Birkbeck educationists, and their greatest uncertainty.

One contemporary reviewer, considering Hard Times and Hodgson's lecture together, commented approvingly on the latter's remarks on the novel, but then went on to observe:

> Mr. Dickens is sufficiently exaggerative to throw discredit on his truths; but yet that there should be scope and room for such a tale at all--that, not among the ignorant of schools only, but among many who have had experience of them, there should be a feeling that, on the whole, he has

> got hold of a fact and a dangerous tendency which those who love their fellow-creatures should not be slow to perceive, is one of the signs of the times, and we have no desire to ignore it. We feel confident that political economists and that many educators of the people rely by far too much on intellectual information and clearness in a certain round of facts, for the improvement of the poor....He is right, surely, in his perception of the cold cheerlessness of the facts of a calculating bodily life; but he should show what may be done by more genial cultivation....We have ourselves many and obstinate rebellings against the class of educators who want to keep the poor wholly within the circle of "useful" facts. The poor man needs, as much as anyone, amusement, enjoyment, ideas beyond his immediate vision.[1]

These comments have an obvious relevance to the present discussion, for they prove beyond doubt (if further proof is needed) that Dickens' satire registered not only with those, like Hodgson, who came within its scope, but with the intelligent observer who was capable of recognising the justice of his criticism. Beyond this, however, the realisation of the reviewer that the poor man needs "amusement, enjoyment, ideas beyond his immediate vision," raises an issue which is central to the debate over Hard Times. Holloway conveniently offers one pole of the argument: objecting to the "vital human impulse" which Leavis commends in the Sleary circus, he sees Dickens' opposition to the world of Gradgrind as something which operates "at a relatively shallow level of consciousness, one represented by the Slearies not as vital horsemen but as plain entertainers." In terms of the society, Dickens' "alternative was something which lay altogether outside the major realities of the social situation with which he dealt."[2]

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1. Gentleman's Magazine, XLII (1854), 277-278. I am grateful to Professor Philip Collins for bringing this interesting contemporary critique to my attention.
2. Holloway, pp. 167-68.

There seem to me to be two issues at stake here: the "vitality" of Sleary's horse-riding as it functions in Hard Times, and Dickens' choice of a circus troupe to embody his opposition to Gradgrind. In so far as the second is a question of Dickens' social awareness, Holloway's low estimate of "plain entertainers" and his statement that they lie"altogether outside the major realities of the social situation," strikes me as evidence, once again, of an inadequate conception of the real lines of force within the contemporary scene. From what has been said of the educational background to Hard Times, it is plain that in all the schemes which men like Ellis were setting in operation for the welfare of the working population, no provision was made for their most crying need of all--simple diversion from the crushing oppressiveness of their lot. The political economists in education, like their fellow utilitarians in other fields, were engaged in what was, in effect, a campaign of containment. The end of their labours was to give the working class child an education which stressed as its dominant principle not the potentialities of life but its inevitable limitations: every object-lesson, every "useful" book and economic cautionary tale, every exhortation to prudence and parental forethought, combined to impress upon the poor the impossibility of escaping from the rigours of their social position. It is not necessary to claim as much as Leavis has done for the "entertainment" which Sleary's horse-riding represents, to appreciate the value of Dickens' perception of this need among the oppressed classes in mid-Victorian England; and the contemporary reviewer's judgment has only been confirmed by the work of a modern scholar

like Altick, who observes that "with a few noteworthy exceptions like Herschel and Dickens, contemporary social critics and reformers failed to understand, or at least to sympathise with, this imperative need for escape on the part of the physically and spiritually imprisoned."[1]

In this context the horse-riding has a decided significance for the social situation as Dickens knew it to be. The Sleary circus represents not so much a superior vitality as a superior freedom, that liberation which the free-play of the imagination brought to the Romantic Poets. Holloway rejects the comparison between Hard Times and Picasso's "Saltimbanques" as "obviously extravagant"; this may be so, but it is not extravagant, surely, to mention Blake's "Chimney Sweeper":

> And by came an Angel who had a bright key,
> And he open'd the coffins and set them all free;
> Then down a green plain leaping, laughing, they run,[2]
> And wash in a river, and shine in the Sun.

VI

It has not been my purpose here to resurrect Leavis' argument, but nearly everything said so far has tended to support his statement that "Dickens here makes a just observation about the affinities and practical tendency of Utilitarianism, as, in his

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1. English Common Reader, pp. 96-7.
2. Holloway, p. 168; Collected Writings of William Blake, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (Oxford, 1966), p. 117.

presentment of the Gradgrind home and the Gradgrind elementary school, he does about the Utilitarian spirit in Victorian education."[1] The whole movement is a striking instance of that simplification of economic thought for propagandist purposes which is the prominent feature of popularising economists in the nineteenth century. It is the "philosophy" of these men that Dickens is attacking, not, as is frequently assumed, the important and comprehensive work of John Stuart Mill. Alfred Marshall noted that "perhaps no other great school of thinkers has ever suffered so much from the way in which its 'parasites' ...professing to simplify economic doctrines, really enunciated them without the conditions required to make them true."[2] In Mr. Gradgrind, Dickens has left a representative portrait of these practical utilitarians who followed in the wake of the great political economists, simplifying and coarsening their theories.

It is clear, then, that Dickens understood the life of his times at a deeper level than Holloway has allowed. And this conclusion has a relevance for our reading of Hard Times: it suggests that the work may be chiefly impressive for the energy with which the essential features of a changing society are comprehended, even as these are in the process of revealing themselves, and are articulated into a permanent and meaningful whole. The authority of this

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1. Great Tradition, p. 228.

2. Principles of Economics, 9th (Variorum) ed. (1961), I, 763n. My thanks are due to Professor Geoffrey Best for alerting me to this passage in Marshall's work, and for his kind assistance generally in matters of historical and social background.

impressive achievement is not diminished by the odd peripheral inconsistency, nor by the dramatic heightening which gives the picture its note of urgency. The colours may be bright and the outline strong, but a knowledge of the society will tend to confirm rather than deny Ruskin's famous directive over this novel: "But let us not lose the use of Dickens's wit and insight, because he chooses to speak in a circle of stage fire. He is entirely right in his main drift and purpose in every book he has written; and all of them, but especially Hard Times, should be studied with close and earnest care by persons interested in social questions."[1]

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1. Works, XVII, 31n.

CHAPTER IV

LITTLE DORRIT AND THE PRISON OF THE PAST

"Time's handiworks by time are haunted,
And nothing now can separate
The corn and tares compactly grown.
The armorial weed in stillness bound
About the stalk; these are our own.
Evil and good stand thick around
In the fields of charity and sin
Where we shall lead our harvest in."

(Edwin Muir, "One Foot in Eden")

I

Hard Times is such an obsessively topical work, owes so much of its vigour of language and clarity of design to Dickens' involvement in contemporary life, that it is tempting to see an extension of these preoccupations in Little Dorrit (1855-57). As John Butt has shown,[1] many "notorieties of the mid eighteen-fifties" can be found in the novel: the Administrative Reform campaign which had been stimulated by the Northcote-Trevelyan report on the Civil Service; the revelations of incompetence and mismanagement in the conduct of the Crimean War; the commercial malpractices of John Sadleir and others; the bitter debates over the introduction of Lord Robert Grosvenor's Sunday Trading Bill in June 1855. More significant, perhaps, is the fact that these topicalities are united by a complicated symbolism of imprisonment, and there are many critics who would agree with Angus Wilson that "in its working out of symbol and in its unity of atmosphere," Little Dorrit is "the most perfect of his books."[2] In this chapter I want to argue that the idea of imprisonment had a particular relevance for Dickens at the time of writing this novel, because it allowed him to express the complexity he had come to feel about his relationship to the past and, through this, to contemporary society as a whole. For

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1. "The Topicality of Little Dorrit," University of Toronto Quarterly, XXIX (1959), 1-10. See also P.D. Herring's unpublished dissertation (Chicago, 1964), "The Background of Charles Dickens' Little Dorrit."
2. "Charles Dickens: A Haunting," Critical Quarterly, II (1960), 105.

Little Dorrit is not only a great satire on the world in which Dickens was living, it is also, like David Copperfield, a major exercise in fictional autobiography. The first proposition should be obvious enough; the second will require some demonstration.

II

"Thirty years ago, Marseilles lay burning in the sun, one day...." (I, i, 1); the first words of Little Dorrit put us back into the past, and by the third chapter we are in the familiar landscape of Dickens's memory, the London of the eighteen-twenties. As in Bleak House, Dickens has taken great care to place his story in an earlier period. Thus John Chivery, composing the inscription for his tombstone in St. George's Churchyard, looks forward mournfully to his death from a broken heart "'about the end of the year one thousand eight hundred and twenty-six'" (I, xviii, 220); and at the beginning of Chapter vi we learn that "thirty years ago there stood, a few doors short of the church of Saint George, in the borough of Southwark, on the left-hand side of the way going southward, the Marshalsea Prison. It had stood there many years before, and it remained there some years afterwards; but it is gone now, and the world is none the worse without it" (I, vi, 57). With characteristic attention to detail Dickens reminds his readers of a fact of London life which many of them must have remembered:

the old Marshalsea Debtor's Prison which (along with the Fleet) had been closed by Act of Parliament in 1842. Throughout the novel, topographical detail is used in this way to evoke the atmosphere of an earlier period. When Arthur Clennam follows Tattycoram and Rigaud from the Strand down the Adelphi to the river, Dickens observes that "there is always, to this day, a sudden pause in that place to the roar of the great thoroughfare." But

> At that time the contrast was far greater; there being no small steam-boats on the river, no landing places but slippery wooden stairs and foot-causeways, no railroad on the opposite bank, no hanging bridge or fish-market near at hand, no traffic on the nearest bridge of stone, nothing moving on the stream but watermen's wherries and coal-lighters. Long and broad black tiers of the latter, moored fast in the mud as if they were never to move again, made the shore funereal and silent after dark; and kept what little water-movement there was, far out towards mid-stream. At any hour later than sunset, and not least in that hour when most of the people who have anything to eat at home are going home to eat it, and when most of those who have nothing have hardly yet slunk out to beg or steal, it was a deserted place and looked on a deserted scene. (II, ix, 531)

An attentive contemporary reader would have recalled that the "railroad on the opposite bank" was not there until 1848, when the South-Western Railway line was joined from Clapham to Waterloo; and he might have recalled the opening of the "hanging bridge," Hungerford Suspension Bridge, in 1845, and the new "fishmarket" which was added to Hungerford Market when it was rebuilt in 1831-33. But he would not have known that this melancholy London landscape of the eighteen-twenties was also the site of Jonathan Warren's blacking factory at 30 Hungerford Stairs, where the author of Little Dorrit had played on the coal-barges at dinner-time with Poll Green and Bob Fagin, or had sat outside the "Fox-under-the-hill" public-

house, eating his solitary dinner and watching the coal-heavers dancing by the river.[1]

The note of desolation in this London landscape is characteristic of the book as a whole, and serves to remind us that in Little Dorrit Dickens was drawing on the most painful memories of his past. In his curiously revealing Preface to the First Edition, Dickens described how he had returned to the Marshalsea after the novel was finished, to see if any portions of the old prison were still standing. He found the outer courtyard transformed into a butter shop, and just as he was about to give up "every brick of the jail for lost," he wandered down an adjacent lane to "'Marshalsea Place:' the houses in which I recognised, not only as the great block of the former prison, but as preserving the rooms that arose in my mind's-eye when I became Little Dorrit's biographer." Here he met a small boy who, although "a quarter of a century too young to know anything about it of himself," gave Dickens "a supernaturally intelligent explanation of the locality in its old uses, and was very nearly correct."

> A little further on, I found the older and smaller wall, which used to enclose the pent-up inner prison where nobody was put, except for ceremony. Whosoever goes into Marshalsea Place, turning out of Angel Court, leading to Bermondsey, will find his feet on the very paving-stones of the extinct Marshalsea jail; will see its narrow yard to the right and to the left, very little altered if at all, except that the walls were lowered when the place got free; will look upon the rooms in which the debtors lived; will stand among the crowding ghosts of many miserable years.[2]

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1. See Forster, p. 31; D.C., xi, 160-61.
2. "Preface to the First Edition of 'Little Dorrit,'" C.P., pp. 314-15.

This is almost a direct confession. In another part of the Preface Dickens referred his satire on the Circumlocution Office to the "common experience of an Englishman"; here he comes close to revealing his own very uncommon experience of the inside of a debtor's prison. A reader might well have asked how Dickens came to know what the inside of the Marshalsea was like in 1826, and might have detected a certain autobiographical irony in his reference to "the crowding ghosts of many miserable years."[1]

The Marshalsea is not the only "ghost" which Dickens chose to confront in Little Dorrit; indeed it is but one manifestation of a larger upheaval from the past in his life at this time. On 29 January 1855 he wrote to Arthur Ryland that he had been "poring over Copperfield (which is my favourite), with the idea of getting a reading out of it, to be called by some such name as 'Young Housekeeping and Little Emily.'"[2] And it is more than coincidental that David's married life with Dora should have been in his mind at a time when he was writing to Forster of his own personal troubles: "Am altogether in a dishevelled state of mind--motes of new books in the dirty air, miseries of older growth threatening to close upon me. Why is it, that as with poor David, a sense comes always crushing on me now, when I fall into low spirits, as of one happiness I have missed in life, and one friend and companion

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1. I am indebted here to K.J. Fielding's article, "Dickens and the Past: The Novelist of Memory" (Experience in the Novel, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce [New York, 1968], pp. 107-31), where the autobiographical significance of the Preface was first pointed out.
2. N, II, 619.

I have never made?"[1] If Butt and Tillotson are right in their conjecture that this letter was written on 9 February and not, as Dexter has it, in January 1855,[2] then it was written the day before he received a letter from his old sweetheart, Maria Beadnell, the Dora of David Copperfield. Dickens was particularly susceptible to a voice from the past at this period. On his birthday, 7 February, he had walked (so he told Miss Coutts) "from Gravesend to Rochester between walls of snow varying from three to six feet high," and he said the same in a letter to Wills, also written on the 9th: "When I was at Gravesend t'other day, I saw, at Gad's Hill ...a little Freehold to be sold. The spot and the very house are literally 'a dream of my childhood,' and I should like to look at it before I go to Paris."[3] Not a likely walk, one would have thought, to take from London in the month of February, and yet this commemorative journey into the past is entirely characteristic of Dickens' mood in 1855, and indicates the depth of his preoccupation with his youth and the "dreams" of his childhood. Maria Beadnell's letter must have seemed like a beneficent gift from the past, offering a return to the lost happiness which he was seeking to recover. And just as Forster's casual mention of meeting the elder Dilke had precipitated the autobiographical fragment which led, in 1849, to the writing of David Copperfield, so the reappearance of Maria Beadnell

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1. Forster, p. 639.
2. Dickens at Work, p. 222n. See also N, II, 620-21.
3. Coutts, p. 290; letter of 9 February 1855. Lehmann, Charles Dickens as Editor, p. 158.

(now married to a Mr. Winter) in 1855 was to act as a catalyst for the retrospective musings of Dickens' middle age. One can detect this pattern in the genesis of all three autobiographical novels, although in the case of Great Expectations the prompting from the past seems to have been more gradual: it was only after Dickens had realised the "dream" of his childhood by purchasing Gad's Hill Place that he was led to reflect on the ironies of the "great expectations" which had brought him there.

When Dickens replied to Maria on 10 February 1855, he made reference to the hero of his autobiographical novel: on receiving her letter "three or four and twenty years vanished like a dream, and I opened it with the touch of my young friend David Copperfield when he was in love."[1] And in subsequent letters to his old love Dickens frequently compares himself to David Copperfield:

> I fancy--though you may not have thought in the old time how manfully I loved you--that you may have seen in one of my books a faithful reflection of the passion I had for you, and may have thought that it was something to have been loved so well, and may have seen in little bits of "Dora" touches of your old self sometimes and a grace here and there that may be revived in your little girls, years hence, for the bewilderment of some other young lover--though he will never be as terribly in earnest as I and David Copperfield were. People used to say to me how pretty all that was, and how fanciful it was, and how elevated it was above the little foolish loves of very young men and women. But they little thought what reason I had to know that it was true and nothing more nor less.[2]

He concluded this letter with the hope "that perhaps you have once or twice laid down that book, and thought, 'How dearly that boy

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1. N, II, 625-26.
2. N, II, 629; letter of 15 February 1855.

must have loved me, and how vividly this man remembers it!'"[1]

David Copperfield is a constant point of reference in Dickens' thoughts about the past at this time--a fact which confirms my view that the novel occupies a specially intimate place in his development. These letters to Maria Beadnell (Mrs. Winter) give an interesting example of Dickens' characteristic method of assessing his relationship to the past, and they enable us to define more clearly the nature of the change which has come over this relationship by the time of Little Dorrit. We can only speculate on the biographical implications of the meeting which took place between Dickens and Maria on 25 February 1855, but in terms of his art this disastrous encounter with the remembered past is an important milestone on the road from David Copperfield to Arthur Clennam.

Perhaps the most striking feature of these letters is the intensity of Dickens' imaginative adherence to the past, the ease with which he found it possible to roll back twenty-five years of his life. The existence of Maria's children, for instance,

> appeared such a prodigious phenomenon, that I was inclined to suspect myself of being out of my mind, until it occurred to me, that perhaps I had nine children of my own! Then the three or four and twenty years began to rearrange themselves in a long procession between me and the changeless Past, and I could not help considering what strange stuff all our little stories are made of.
>
> Believe me, you cannot more tenderly remember our old days and our old friends than I do....I forget nothing of those times. They are just as still and plain and clear as if I had never been in a crowd since, and had never seen or heard my own name out of my own house.[2]

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1. N, II, 629.
2. N, II, 626; letter of 10 February 1856.

"The changeless Past": it is, as we have seen, a characteristic and significant phrase. Like David Copperfield, Dickens tended to think of figures from his past as they had been when he knew them, fixed and unchanged in memory. When Maria wrote that she was "toothless, fat, old and ugly," he refused to believe her: "You are always the same in my remembrance," he replied. "I have never seen a girl play the harp, from that day to this, but my attention has been instantly arrested, and that drawing room has stood before me so plainly that I could write a most accurate description of it"; and whenever he saw in another's face Maria's tendency to draw her eyebrows together, he had been "carried away at the rate of a thousand miles a second, and have thought 'Maria Beadnell'!"[1] In the same letter Dickens went on to say:

> When we were falling off from each other, I came from the House of Commons many a night at two or three o'clock in the morning, only to wander past the place you were asleep in. And I have gone over that ground within these twelve months hoping it was not ungrateful to consider whether any reputation the world can bestow is repayment to a man for the loss of such a vision of his youth as mine. You ask me to treasure what you tell me, in my heart of hearts. O see what I have cherished there, through all this time and all these changes![2]

This is surely a remarkable confession for a man in Dickens' position to have made, and when one considers the intense productivity of his life since last seeing Maria Beadnell--ten novels, nine children, an active journalism, travel books, Christmas stories--it becomes impossible to dismiss this imaginative loyalty

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1. N, II, 634; letter of 22 February 1855.
2. N, II, 634.

to the "vision of his youth" as merely the self-pity and nostalgia of middle age. Pity for his own youth is certainly an unattractive element in many of Dickens' recollections, but the attitude of mind revealed in these letters goes deeper than sentimentality. One is amazed, for instance, that with all the evidence of change in his own life Dickens could have believed it possible to recover this area of the past, and yet he concluded the same letter with the earnest pledge: "Remember, I accept all with my whole soul, and reciprocate all."[1] What Maria wrote to elicit such an eager reply remains one of the unanswered questions of Dickensian biography, but Dickens was clearly unprepared for the reality of their meeting three days later. He found Maria a stout, brainless, flirtatious matron of forty-four, who "was very fond of porter" and "combined a great deal of sherry with sentiment."[2]

This encounter did more than shatter a cherished illusion; it called into question Dickens' whole imaginative relationship to the past. His letters to Maria Beadnell reveal how intimately bound up she was with the "vision of his youth," and the surest sign that this passionate recall of an earlier period was not a simple case of sentimental fantasy can be seen, I think, in the fact that "bad and good are inextricably linked in remembrance."[3] The letter of 22 February, in which he promises to "reciprocate all," contains a moving account of the "wasted tenderness of these hard years":

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1. N, II, 635.
2. L.D., I, xiii, 158; see also Johnson, II, 835-38.
3. The moral, it will be recalled, of The Haunted Man: see Forster, p. 508.

> My entire devotion to you, and the wasted tenderness of those hard years which I have ever since half loved, half dreaded to recall, made so deep an impression on me that I refer to it a habit of suppression which now belongs to me, which I know is no part of my original nature, but which makes me chary of showing my affections, even to my children, except when they are very young. A few years ago (just before Copperfield) I began to write my life, intending the manuscript to be found among my papers when its subject should be concluded. But as I began to approach within sight of that part of it, I lost courage and burned the rest.[1]

And in his fictional autobiography it is this memory which proved ultimately resistant: the childhood experiences of the debtor's prison and the blacking factory find their way into the narrative, but the young David Copperfield, unlike his creator, marries his first love and is only separated from her by death.

What, then, is the source of Dickens' loyalty to this period of his youth? Throughout these letters one catches a persistent note of regret at the loss of the emotional vitality of his early manhood, a time which he particularly associates with Maria: "the most innocent, the most ardent, and the most disinterested days of my life had you for their Sun," he wrote to her on 15 February, and in his previous letter--"You so belong to the days when the qualities that have done me most good since, were growing in my boyish heart that I cannot end my answer to you lightly....We are all sailing away to the sea, and have a pleasure in thinking of the river we are upon, when it was very narrow and little."[2] Maria is a link with that earlier time:

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1. N, II, 633.
2. N, II, 629, 627.

> Whatever of fancy, romance, energy, passion, aspiration and determination belong to me, I never have separated and never shall separate from the hard-hearted little woman--you--whom it is nothing to say I would have died for, with the greatest alacrity!...I have never heard anybody addressed by your name, or spoken of by your name, without a start. The sound of it has always filled me with a kind of pity and respect for the deep truth that I had, in my silly hobbledehoyhood, to bestow upon one creature who represented the whole world to me. I have never been so good a man since, as I was when you made me wretchedly happy. I shall never be half so good a fellow any more.[1]

In writing about his past Dickens is sometimes guilty, as he is here, of condescension and self-pity, deprecating a memory even in the act of asserting its intensity ("my silly hobbledehoyhood"); but there can be no doubt of the genuineness of his feelings for the girl who had made him "wretchedly happy." This identification of emotional and spiritual vitality with a remembered past is an imaginative tendency which relates Dickens to Wordsworth on the one hand, and to Hardy and Proust on the other. He shares their belief in the past as a repository of states of feeling which are no longer available in the same intensity to the diminished sensibility of the mature man, and we have already seen how, in David Copperfield, Dickens communicates this sense of adult loss in a spirit similar to Wordsworth's in The Prelude and "Immortality Ode": "The things which I have seen I now can see no more." In the "changeless Past" lies buried a certain way of looking at the world, a heightened responsiveness to life which the artist can recover in the act of memory.

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1. N, II, 628-29; letter of 15 February 1855.

A belief in the unaltered character of remembered experience was for Dickens both a refuge from the disappointments of daily life and a complex source of creative activity; but a conviction that the past is changeless is always open to correction by experience, and one can see in David Copperfield how those characters whose survival might complicate the ending are released into the timeless realm of memory, either by death or (effectively) by emigration. The Maria Beadnell to whom Dickens wrote these letters in 1855 belonged to this "changeless Past," but the woman he met on that rainy Sunday in February existed all too painfully in the present, an obstinate testimony to the fact of change in human life. One consequence of this disastrous meeting was the creation of Flora Finching, but she herself is only the most dramatic illustration of a larger problem with which Dickens is dealing in Little Dorrit. The episode is symptomatic of the breakdown in Dickens' relationship to his past which has taken place by 1856, and the novel which he wrote as a result is in many ways a major revision of attitudes evolved in David Copperfield.

III

The disturbing implications of this encounter with the past are revealed in Chapter xiii of Little Dorrit, where Arthur Clennam goes to visit his old sweetheart, Flora Finching, and finds--as Dickens had found with Maria--that the consolations of memory are

powerless to survive contact with the realities of change. The contrast is a "fatal shock" to him: although he had "as completely dismissed her from any association with his Present or Future as if she had been dead ...he had kept the old fancy of the Past unchanged, in its old sacred place. And now, after all, the last of the Patriarchs coolly walked into the parlour, saying in effect, "Be good enough to throw it down and dance upon it. This is Flora'" (I, xiii, 150). Clennam leaves the house feeling dazed and light-headed, and when he returns home and sits before a dying fire, he reflects that "while all that was hard and stern in his recollection, remained Reality on being proved ...the one tender recollection of his experience would not bear the same test, and melted away" (I, xiii, 164):

> Therefore, he sat before his dying fire, sorrowful to think upon the way by which he had come to that night, yet not strewing poison on the way by which other men had come to it. That he should have missed so much, and at his time of life should look so far about him for any staff to bear him company upon his downward journey and cheer it, was a just regret. He looked at the fire from which the blaze departed, from which the after-glow subsided, in which the ashes turned grey, from which they dropped to dust, and thought, 'How soon I too shall pass through such changes, and be gone!'
>
> To review his life, was like descending a green tree in fruit and flower, and seeing all the branches wither and drop off one by one, as he came down towards them. (I, xiii, 165)

The range of these reflections extends far beyond their immediate source in Clennam's meeting with Flora Finching, and we can safely assume that Dickens is here expressing the crisis in his own relationship to the past. In David Copperfield the painful elements in memory had been softened by the recollection of the

"vision of his youth," and Dickens was able to achieve a reconciliation with the sufferings of the past in the knowledge that "all these things have worked together to make of me what I am";[1] he could see time, in other words, as a meaningful pattern which contributed to a mature identity. But in Little Dorrit time has become an alien and relentless progress: like the dying ashes in the grate and the withered branches of a once "green tree in fruit and flower," Clennam is involved in a remorseless cycle of change which he cannot control and which remains indifferent to any meaning he may seek to impose upon it.

The significance of this transition needs to be stressed. Somewhere between 1851 and 1855 Dickens' reconciliation with the past broke down; the disillusionment of his meeting with Maria Beadnell was probably as much a symptom as a cause of this breakdown, but it undoubtedly sharpened his awareness of the discontinuity between memory and reality, and forced him to revise the idea of the development of the self which David Copperfield had seemed to advance so confidently. Few writers of genius can have identified themselves quite so totally with the domestic ideals of their civilisation or been so tragically ill-equipped to inhabit them; and it is a supreme irony of Dickens' career that the novelist who more than most gave expression to these ideals, who in his fiction had from the very outset presented quiet and productive domesticity as a type of the achieved life, should have found the

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1. Forster, p. 35.

fruits of his own middle age so very barren. David Copperfield had anticipated a comfortable maturity for its hero; when, in Little Dorrit, we encounter a hero who is in fact middle-aged, the divergence from the ideal could not be more extreme. Arthur Clennam has to face a quickening knowledge of his own age without any of the consolations of maturity. At a time of life when the patterns experience has imposed may offer some reassurance for its disappointments, he can find no stay in continuity; he is a man without will or profession or domestic roots, a dreamer for whom the notion of a "changeless Past" no longer offers imaginative compensation. But the most disquieting feature of his predicament is the fact that his profound sense of transition finds no reflection in the life around him, and that everywhere--in his personal relations and in the public world--Clennam is confronted with the depressing rigidity of the past. It is in these sort of tensions, I would suggest, that Little Dorrit takes its origin.

We are bound to conclude, of course, that Clennam and his creator are not identical, that the middle-aged failure who can say "'I have no will'" (I, ii, 20) was conceived by a man of intensely energetic will who was enjoying, at the time of writing Little Dorrit, a success unique in the history of English Literature. Yet it is a measure of Dickens' personal involvement in Little Dorrit that Arthur Clennam should be, after David Copperfield and Pip, the most clearly autobiographical creation in his novels, and that he should have chosen this will-less character to express

the acute personal crisis in his own relationship to the past. The parallels are unmistakable, as one can see when one turns from the Maria Beadnell letters to Dickens' correspondence with Forster at this time. The image of the dying fire, for instance, is repeated in a letter written to Forster shortly after the meeting with Maria: "I don't quite apprehend what you mean by my over-rating the strength of the feeling of five-and-twenty years ago....No one can imagine in the most distant degree what pain the recollection gave me in Copperfield. And, just as I can never open that book as I open any other book, I cannot see the face (even at four-and-forty), or hear the voice, without going wandering away over the ashes of all that youth and hope in the wildest manner."[1] And it was to Forster that he communicated the burden of his nostalgia for the "old days":

> However strange it is to be never at rest, and never satisfied, and ever trying after something that is never reached, and to be always laden with plot and plan and care and worry, how clear it is that it must be, and that one is driven by an irresistible might until the journey is worked out!...The old days--the old days! Shall I ever, I wonder, get the frame of mind back as it used to be then? Something of it perhaps--but never quite as it used to be. I find that the skeleton in my domestic closet is becoming a pretty big one.[2]

This mood of personal discontent brought on a furious desire for movement and activity. No sooner had Dickens finished Hard Times than he was writing to Forster of his "visions of living for half a year or so, in all sorts of inaccessible placed, and opening a new book therein. A floating idea of going up above the snow-line

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1. Forster, p. 49.
2. Forster, p. 639.

in Switzerland, and living in some astonishing convent, hovers about me....";[1] and when work on Little Dorrit began, he confessed to Miss Coutts that his restlessness was "impossible to be described--impossible to be imagined--wearing and tearing to be experienced. I sit down of a morning, with all kinds of notes for my new book ...resolve to begin--get up, and go out, and walk a dozen miles--sit down again next morning--get up and go down a railroad--come back again, and register a vow to go out of town instantly, and begin at the feet of the Pyrenees--sit down again--get up and walk about my room all day--wander about London till midnight ...and am at present going through the whole routine, over and over and over again."[2]

It was only perhaps in amateur theatricals that Dickens could escape from his restlessness, but even this relief was temporary and when he wrote to Macready of his "calm" in the midst of preparations for Wilkie Collins' Frozen Deep, one is amazed at the strenuousness with which the private catharsis had been achieved: "Calm amidst the wreck, your aged friend glides away on the Dorrit stream, forgetting the uproar for a stretch of hours, refreshing himself with a ten or twelve miles' walk, pitches headforemost into foaming rehearsals, placidly emerges for editorial purposes, smokes over buckets of distemper with Mr. Stanfield aforesaid, again calmly floats upon the Dorrit waters."[3] In these attempts to transcend his experience Dickens reveals his

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1. Forster, p. 638.
2. Coutts, p. 296; letter of 8 May 1855.
3. N, II, 815; letter of 13 December 1856.

utter dependence upon the business of life, and the poignancy of this effort to derive the "infinite" from the "finite" is something which Forster, in a moment of fine sympathy, recognised at the heart of his friend's unrest:

> Not his genius only, but his whole nature, was too exclusively made up of sympathy for, and with, the real in its most intense form, to be sufficiently provided against failure in the realities around him. There was for him no "city of the mind" against outward ills, for inner consolation and shelter. It was in and from the actual he still stretched forward to find the freedom and satisfactions of an ideal, and by his very attempts to escape the world he was driven back into the thick of it.[1]

To which might be added K.J. Fielding's comment that "one of the mysteries of Little Dorrit remains, its significance as Dickens's attempt to create a 'city of the mind' as a refuge from all that harassed him."[2]

There are signs that these personal tensions had begun to affect his social thinking, too. As his own predicament became less representative, less amenable to the patterns of middle class life, one can sense Dickens' growing dissatisfaction with the accepted conventions of English society. When he visited the Paris Exhibition in October 1855, he found the English paintings lacking in "character, fire, purpose," when compared to the work of French artists: "There is a horrid respectability about most of the best of them--a little, finite, systematic routine in them, strangely expressive to me of the state of England itself."[3]

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1. Forster, p. 641.
2. Charles Dickens, p. 183.
3. Forster, p. 617.

This criticism is repeated in an article he wrote for Household Words in January 1856, "Insularities," where England is seen to be under the domination of "that abominable old tyrant, Madame Grundy," and the more liberal social habits of the French are held up for approval.[1] The contrast between the two civilisations is a feature of his journalism at this time, and it is there--though more ambiguously--in Little Dorrit. The restrictions of English culture crystallise around the idea of "respectability": this is always a complex notion in Dickens, but here it takes on a largely negative connotation as the enemy of freedom and imagination. In an important letter to Forster he gave vent to his frustration at the "smooth gentleman" who complained that the heroes of English novels were unnaturally virtuous:

> I am continually hearing this of Scott from English people here [France], who pass their lives with Balzac and Sand. But O my smooth friend, what a shining impostor you must think yourself and what an ass you must think me, when you suppose that by putting a brazen face upon it you can blot out of my knowledge the fact that this same unnatural young gentleman ...whom you meet in those other books and in mine, must be presented to you in that unnatural aspect by reason of your morality, and is not to have, I will not say any of the indecencies you like, but not even any of the experiences, trials, perplexities, and confusions inseparable from the making or unmaking of all men![2]

This is an interesting outburst, and suggests that Dickens' discontent with the given conventions was related to a need to express in his fiction something of those "experiences, trials, perplexities, and confusions inseparable from the making or unmaking of all men."

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1. H.W., XIII, 19 January 1856, 1-4.
2. Forster, pp. 715-16; letter of 15 August 1856.

Mrs. Grundy appears in Little Dorrit as Mrs. General, the enemy of freedom and imagination, whose retirement at night "was always her frostiest ceremony; as if she felt it necessary that the human imagination should be chilled into stone, to prevent its following her" (II, xv, 610).

IV

Whether it arose out of these personal preoccupations or not, the "Memoranda Book" which Dickens started to keep in January 1855 gives some indication of the ways in which they may have influenced his imagination at the time of writing Little Dorrit.

Forster is probably right to date the entries in the "Memoranda Book" from between 1855 and 1865,[1] and Dickens seems to have used it

1. Forster, p. 747.

intermittently during that ten-year period--chiefly for Little Dorrit, A Tale of Two Cities, and Our Mutual Friend. (He did not need it for Great Expectations, the other novel of this time, and this confirms a sense one has anyway of the special and intimate origin of that masterpiece.) References are particularly numerous to characters and situations which appear in Little Dorrit, and as these occur in the first twelve pages it is safe to assume that this portion of the notebook was written shortly before or during work on the novel. Many of the characters are here foreshadowed: Casby, Pancks, Mrs. Clennam, Arthur Clennam, Little Dorrit, Mr. Dorrit, Mrs. General--"The woman who is never on any account to hear of anything shocking. For whom the world is to be of barley-sugar" (p. 11)--Gowan, Mr. Merdle, even perhaps Mr. F's Aunt--"The bequeathed maid servant, or friend. Left as a legacy. And a devil of a legacy too" (p. 12).

More significantly, certain key ideas of the novel emerge in these early pages. A preoccupation with time, and with the effects of time, is very pronounced. One finds this, for instance, in the note: "The ferryman on a peaceful river, who lives, who dies, who does well, who does ill, who changes, who grows old--the river runs six hours up, and six hours down, the current sets off that point, the same allowance must be made for the drifting of the boat, the same tune is played by the rippling water against the prow" (pp. 10-11). This is repeated and developed in Chapter xvi of Book I, "Nobody's Weakness," in which Arthur Clennam goes down to Twickenham to visit the Meagles:

> Within view was the peaceful river and the ferry-boat, to moralise to all the inmates, saying: Young or old, passionate or tranquil, chafing or content, you, thus runs the current always. Let the heart swell into what discord it will, thus plays the rippling water on the prow of the ferry-boat ever the same tune. Year after year, so much allowance for the drifting of the boat, so many miles an hour the flowing of the stream, here the rushes, there the lilies, nothing uncertain or unquiet, upon this road that steadily runs away; while you, upon your flowing road of time, are so capricious and distracted. (I, xvi, 191)

Here the image of the river makes concrete a conception of time we have already encountered in Arthur's fireside reflections: the changes of life can no longer be harmonised with the individual moral pattern, but exist apart, a process as neutral and dispassionate as the current of a river. And yet there is a certain consolation in this fact, too. If the Wordsworthian compensation which David Copperfield found in the act of memory has gone, then at least the river offers a model of the inexorable change which subsumes the distractions of human life. Clennam finds peace in the impersonality of this changelessness within change, and thinks "that it might be better to flow away monotonously, like the river, and to compound for its insensibility to happiness with its insensibility to pain" (I, xvi, 200).

Also noted at this time, on page five of the "Memoranda Book," are a series of titles for a "story in two periods" which finally became A Tale of Two Cities. It is interesting to see that this novel had its origin in Dickens' fascination with time, memory, and the passage of the years; among the titles we find "Time," "Five and Twenty Years," "Years and Years," "Rolling Years," "Memory Carton," "Two Generations," "Long Ago." A Tale of Two Cities will be

discussed later in this study; here it is only necessary to mention in passing that "Memory Carton" is the first character in the book to be mentioned, and that "Five and Twenty Years" is the time-span which, in Dickens' writing about the past, separates his youth from his middle age: "I don't quite apprehend what you mean by my over-rating the strength of the feeling of five-and-twenty years ago."[1]

One corollary of Dickens' preoccupation with the process of change is a new interest in the attitude of mind which seeks to deny or circumvent change, and the note for Mrs. Clennam introduces a theme which is central to Little Dorrit: "Bed ridden (or room ridden) twenty--five and twenty--years; any length of time. As to most things, kept at a standstill all the while. Thinking of altered streets as the old streets--changed things as the unchanged things--the youth or girl I quarrelled with all those years ago, as the same youth or girl now. Brought out of doors by an unexpected exercise of my latent strength of character, and then how strange!" (p. 3). This idea is incorporated in Chapter xxix of Book I, where Dickens observes of Mrs. Clennam:

> Pictures of demolished streets and altered houses, as they formerly were when the occupant of the chair was familiar with them; images of people as they too used to be, with little or no allowance made for the lapse of time since they were seen ...To stop the clock of busy existence, at the hour when we were personally sequestered from it ...is the infirmity of many invalids, and the mental unhealthiness of almost all recluses. (I, xxix, 339)

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1. Forster, p. 49; letter to Forster protesting the strength of his feeling for Maria Beadnell. See also the letter of 10 February 1855 to Maria herself, in which he replied to her first letter: "Three or four and twenty years vanished like a dream, and I opened it with the touch of my young friend David Copperfield when he was in love" (N, II, 625-26).

Although Dickens' comment here is rather narrowly moralistic, we have already seen how dear the notion of a "changeless Past" was to him, and it would be a mistake to consider Mrs. Clennam as merely a recluse. Like Flora Finching, she is the creation of Dickens' discovery that memory and reality are not continuous; and this discovery, in turn, is related to the larger realisation that the past has power to control and dominate the present--a perception which, as we shall see, is the source of some of his deepest insights in Little Dorrit.

That the notion of a life trapped in the past was related, in Dickens' imagination, to the idea of imprisonment, is attested by an article he published in Household Words in January 1853, entitled "Where We Stopped Growing."[1] Dickens set out to consider the childhood fancies which he had not outgrown--Robinson Crusoe, The Arabian Nights, Don Quixote, Gil Blas--but the piece takes on a darker shade with the confession that "there are real people and places that we have never outgrown, though they themselves may have passed away long since: which we always regard with the eye and mind of childhood."[2] Amongst these are two deranged women whose lives had been arrested round personal catastrophes in the past: the one, dressed in black and with garishly painted cheeks, was popularly known as "Rouge et Noire" and used to roam the streets of the City lamenting (so the story went) the death of her only brother, who had been executed for forgery; the other was dressed entirely in white and was known as the "White Woman"--"She is a

1. H.W., VI, 1 January 1853, 361-63; M.P., pp. 358-64.
2. H.W., VI, 362; M.P., p. 361.

conceited old creature, cold and formal in manner, and evidently went simpering mad on personal grounds alone--no doubt because a wealthy Quaker wouldn't marry her."[1] Dickens has sympathy for "Rouge et Noire" but none for the "White Woman": like Miss Havisham (for whom she is clearly a source) her retreat into the past is seen to be both selfish and sinister. But his own response to this type of individual is in itself revealing, for just as they are trapped in the past, so Dickens too has been unable to outgrow his original perception of them, when he saw "with the eye and mind of childhood." And it is surely significant, when we turn to Little Dorrit and A Tale of Two Cities, to read in the same essay that "we have never outgrown the rugged walls of Newgate, or any other prison on the outside. All within, is still the same blank of remorse and misery...." Nor had Dickens been able to separate "the wicked old Bastille" from his childish terror at "that old man of the affecting anecdote, who was at last set free. But, who brought his white face, and his white hair, and his phantom figure, back again, to tell them what they had made him--how he had no wife, no child, no friend, no recognition of the light and air--and prayed to be shut up in his old dungeon till he died."[2] Like the "White Woman," the notion of imprisonment belongs essentially to the dark recesses

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1. H.W., VI, 363; M.P., p. 362. In "Miss Havisham Brought to Book" (PMLA, LXXXI [1966], 278-85), Martin Meisel has suggested that the two women were not only known to Dickens in real life, but may have been associated in his mind through his recollection of their stage impersonation by Charles Mathews and Frederick Yates, in a sketch presented at the Adelphi on 18 April 1831.

2. H.W., VI, 363; M.P., p. 363.

of Dickens' childhood memory, where they were fused with the recollection of his father's imprisonment in the Marshalsea; and it is no accident that these ideas should predominate in his fiction at a time when he was especially concerned with the problems of suffering and the past.

Indeed, it is the conditioning quality of time which seems to have chiefly fascinated Dickens, the way in which the slow accumulation of the years fixes our identity, no matter how we may resist the process. This idea receives its most complex expression in the character of Mr. Dorrit, the pattern of whose career is already evident in the original note: "First sign of Little Dorrit's father failing and breaking down. Cancels long interval. Begins to talk about the Turnkey who first called him the Father of the Marshallsea--as if he were still living...." (p. 12). But this preoccupation runs throughout the early pages of the "Memoranda Book," even in notes which were not subsequently taken up. The authority of time past is strikingly conveyed in this jotting for a story:

> Beginning with the breaking up of a large party of guests at a country house--house left lonely with the shrunken family in it--guests spoken of, and introduced to the reader that way.
>
> Or, beginning with a house abandoned by a family fallen into reduced circumstances. Their old furniture there, and numberless tokens of their old comforts. Inscriptions under the bells downstairs. "Mr. John's room"--"Miss Caroline's room." Great gardens trimly kept to attract a tenant--but no one in them--a landscape without figures. Billiard Room; table covered up, like a body. Great stables without horses, and great coach-houses without carriages. Grass growing in the chinks of the stone paving, this bright cold winter day. Downhills. (p. 2)

There is a final pattern in these notebook entries which is of relevance to Little Dorrit, and this is an interest in what one might call the consequences of personal displacement. This can be seen, on the one hand, in notes of clearly autobiographical origin like "The man who is incapable of his own happiness. Or who is always in pursuit of happiness" (p. 7), and "A misplaced and mismarried man. Always, as it were, playing hide and seek with the world and never finding what Fortune seems to have hidden when he was born" (p. 10); and on the other in a concern for the alien perspective, the outsider's view: "The character of the real refugee--not the conventional; the real" (p. 10). It is as if a knowledge of discontinuity in his own life had sharpened Dickens' awareness of the discontinuity in the world about him. Here, for instance, one encounters a new ambiguity in the relationship between the generations:

> The father (married young) who, in perfect innocence, venerates his son's young wife, as the realisation of his ideal of woman. (He not happy in his own choice.) The son slights her, and knows nothing of her worth. The father watches her, protects her, labours for her, endures for her--is for ever divided between his strong natural affection for his son as his son, and his resentment against him as this young creature's husband.

This note occurs on page fourteen of the "Memoranda Book," and so cannot be dated with the Little Dorrit entries; but it very obviously arises out of the same kind of interests, as does an even stranger entry at the bottom of page twelve:

> The idea of my being brought up by my mother--me the narrator--my father being dead; and growing up in this belief until I find that my father is the gentleman I

> have seen, and oftener heard of, who has the handsome young wife, and the Dog I once took notice of when I was a little child, and who lives in the great house and drives about. (White's "Harriet's" poor boy).

As personal relationships become more complicated, less straightforward, Dickens is stimulated to consider the familiar in its unfamiliar aspect. On page ten, the "English landscape" is to be seen by "an Englishman--say, from China--who knows nothing about his native country." And on page fourteen, he contemplates "Representing London--or Paris, or any other great place--in the new light of being actually unknown to all the people in the story, and only taking the colour of their fears and fancies and opinions--so getting a new aspect, and being unlike itself. An odd unlikeness of itself." This interest in the unusual perspective as a fictional technique (it might almost be called point-of-view) can be seen in the opening of Book II, where the meeting of the Dorrits with Mr. and Mrs. Gowan and Blandois is presented entirely through observed mannerism, and without any explicit reference to our previous knowledge of their characters.

V

When we turn from Dickens' letters and "Memoranda Book" to the novel itself, we can begin to see more clearly how the autobiographical elements in Little Dorrit are related to the vision of society which it communicates. If, as every critic has recognised,

the symbol of the prison expresses Dickens' increasingly pessimistic view of the contemporary world, then it is also, and more intimately, a focus for the problem of the past which had been troubling him at this time. For Little Dorrit, one could say, is a novel about the power of the past to imprison the present, whether this is revealed in characters like Mrs. Clennam and Flora Finching, or in the institutions of society itself--the legacy of guilt and suffering which the Marshalsea hands down to its children, the hereditary incompetence of the Circumlocution Office, the petrifying aristocratic traditions of "Society." The world of the novel is one in which, like the city of Rome visited by the Dorrits in their prosperity, "everything seemed to be trying to stand still for ever on the ruins of something else" (II, vii, 512). At the centre of this world are Little Dorrit and Arthur Clennam, characters who have both suffered as a result of the past and who are both, in their different ways, trying to answer a question which we know had a particular relevance for Dickens himself in 1855: "How are we to account for what time has made of us?"

Kathleen Tillotson has demonstrated how the novel developed from the narrowly topical "Nobody's Fault" to a "novel of individuals," with Little Dorrit herself as the centre-piece in the cover for the monthly parts;[1] and it is as a "novel of individuals," I believe, that Little Dorrit is best approached. Nothing could be more inaccurate than to say, as a recent critic has done, that the

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1. Dickens at Work, pp. 222-33.

characters "are brought to some semblance of life, but ...are poetically simplified so that, without losing the recognisable lineaments of humanity, they represent the forces and pressures of a venal society."[1] In fact, public issues make a late appearance in Little Dorrit when one recalls the immediate presentation of Chancery in Bleak House and the Gradgrind philosophy in Hard Times: Dickens held over his satire on the Circumlocution Office until Chapter x, "Containing the Whole Science of Government," and used the first nine chapters to introduce several of the main characters. Before the topical matter appears, that is to say, we have learnt in detail of the history and background of Clennam and Little Dorrit, and are already involved in the details of the action.

A criticism frequently made of Little Dorrit is that the plot is "tedious and artificial to a degree rarely found even in Dickens."[2] The conventional machinery of hidden secrets and suppressed codicils is certainly over-intricate, but one does not have to resort to special pleading to see that these melodramatic devices are, for once, entirely appropriate to Dickens' subject. In a novel concerned with the problem of the past, we have the sense of an action reaching back in time, probing the past for reasons and patterns which will explain the present. The centre of this persistent questioning is Clennam, who when we first meet him in conversation with Mr. Meagles is already confessing to the

1. J.C. Reid, Charles Dickens: Little Dorrit in Studies in English Literature (ed. David Daiches), XXIX (1967), p. 36.
2. John Wain, "Little Dorrit," in Dickens and the Twentieth Century p. 175.

uncertainty at the heart of his personal dilemma, characteristically in a phrase which recalls the river of time we have noted elsewhere: "'I am such a waif and stray everywhere, that I am liable to be drifted where any current may set'" (I, ii, 20). Troubled by the past and by his relationship to the past, he seeks to correct its influence in the present by uncovering the "'secret remembrance'" (I, v, 48) which his father had revealed on his deathbed. In this way the questioning which initiates the plot arises naturally and inevitably out of Clennam's personal predicament. The honesty which prompts him to confront his mother leads him ultimately to Little Dorrit and a reconciliation with the past.

The skill with which Dickens has plotted the early chapters of his novel can be seen in the second monthly number, which comprises Clennam's encounter with his mother in Chapter v, "Family Affairs," the introduction of the Marshalsea in Chapter vi, the story of the "child of the Marshalsea" in Chapter vii, and "The Look," Chapter viii, in which Clennam visits the Marshalsea and introduces himself to Little Dorrit. In this way Dickens achieves the effect of associating Clennam with Little Dorrit in the reader's mind. Both have been brought up in depressing environments, both have suffered from the consequences of the past. This core of similarity in their different experiences is to be the foundation of their future relationship, and when Little Dorrit asks Clennam to burn the codicil at the end of the novel, the act is both the consummation of the plot and a final, almost ritualistic, exorcism of the past.

"The imagination of Little Dorrit," Lionel Trilling has remarked, "is marked not so much by its powers of particularization as by its powers of generalization and abstraction."[1] This statement is certainly true of the Circumlocution Office and Merdle's dinner-parties, yet when we turn to these early chapters it is surely to recognise that the strength of the writing here owes little to any power of abstraction and everything to a marvellous concreteness of detail. When Mrs. Bangham and Dr. Haggage deliver Little Dorrit, she is born into the undeniable physical realities of a hot summer's day in the Marshalsea, where "the flies fell into the traps by hundreds; and at length one little life, hardly stronger than theirs, appeared among the multitude of lesser deaths" (I, vi, 62). And this physical context is inseparable from Dickens' meaning, is in fact the vehicle of that meaning at its most complex. His perception of the degradation of prison life adheres less in any generalised statement than, for example, in the rhythms of the brandy-sodden Haggage's speech, as he justifies the Marshalsea to Mr. Dorrit: "'Bah, bah, sir, what does it signify? A little more elbow-room is all we want here. We are quiet here; we don't get badgered here; there's no knocker here, sir, to be hammered at by creditors and bring a man's heart into his mouth....It's freedom, sir, it's freedom!'" (I, vi, 63). Moreover, this detailed evocation of Little Dorrit's early environment enables us to understand those paradoxical elements of humanity within it which have rescued her

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1. Introduction to Little Dorrit (1953), p. xv.

to be more than merely a child of circumstances. There is her touching friendship with the old turnkey, Bob, who acts as a sort of foster-father to her, taking her into the country on Sundays:

> 'Thinking of the fields,' the turnkey said once, after watching her, 'ain't you?'
> 'Where are they?' she inquired.
> 'Why, they're--over there, my dear,' said the turnkey, with a vague flourish of his key. 'Just about there.'
> 'Does anybody open them, and shut them? Are they locked?' The turnkey was discomfited. 'Well,' he said, 'Not in general.'
> 'Are they very pretty, Bob?' she called him Bob, by his own particular request and instruction.
> 'Lovely. Full of flowers. There's buttercups, and there's daisies, and there's'--the turnkey hesitated, being short of floral nomenclature--'there's dandelions, and all manner of games.' (I, vii, 69)

There is nothing sentimental about this exchange, grounded as it is in a mutual desire and a mutual ignorance. Little Dorrit and Bob are both committed city-dwellers, yet their feeling for the countryside is real and comes across all the more poignantly because it cannot be fully articulated. At such moments one recognises--and it is a measure of the level of complexity at which Dickens is working in Little Dorrit--that gentleness and compassion can exist in the strangest places, and that for all the failure and sordidness and defeat in the prison there is also a kind of humanity which is inseparable from these things. Little Dorrit's goodness is not improbable, like Little Nell's, but issues directly from the experiences to which she has been exposed. She is the Child of the Marshalsea in a more than literal sense, a human flower that has taken root in a stony soil.

The paradoxical attributes of the London landscape in Little

Dorrit are further developed in Chapter ix, when Clennam accompanies Little Dorrit across the Iron Bridge. It has been raining and the sky is overcast:

> Thus they emerged upon the Iron Bridge, which was as quiet after the roaring streets, as though it had been open country. The wind blew roughly, the wet squalls came rattling past them, skimming the pools on the road and pavement, and raining them down into the river. The clouds raced on furiously in the lead-coloured sky, the smoke and mist raced after them, the dark tide ran fierce and strong in the same direction. Little Dorrit seemed the least, the quietest, and weakest of Heaven's creatures.
>
> 'Let me put you in a coach,' said Clennam, very nearly adding, 'my poor child.'
>
> She hurriedly declined, saying that wet or dry made little difference to her; she was used to go about in all weathers. He knew it to be so, and was touched with more pity; thinking of the slight figure at his side, making its nightly way through the damp dark boisterous streets, to such a place of rest. (I, ix, 96)

The hostility of the elements parallels that of the city itself: the streets are "roaring," "damp dark boisterous," and the Iron Bridge suggests harshness. This is the fallen world of London, an environment which seems chaotic and inhuman. Later Clennam observes "the wilderness of masts on the river, and the wilderness of steeples on the shore, indistinctly mixed together in the stormy haze ..." (I, ix, 99), and he is filled with compassion for the defenceless figure of Little Dorrit, as she makes her way against the pressure of these hard and unyielding surroundings. Yet--and the point arises, unforced, from the very particularity with which Dickens has realised this scene--the Iron Bridge is a place of meeting, "as quiet after the roaring streets, as though it had been open country." In the midst of the isolation and squalor of the great city, two

human beings come together and sympathy is born; out of all that most seems to threaten and diminish life, life is ultimately enriched. As Clennam and Little Dorrit walk back together "through the miserable muddy streets, and among the poor, mean shops, and were jostled by the crowds of dirty hucksters usual to a poor neighbourhood," he realises that there was nothing "that was pleasant to any of the five senses. Yet it was not a common passage through common rain, and mire, and noise, to Clennam, having this little, slender, careful creature on his arm" (I, ix, 100). And hereafter, when he thinks of Little Dorrit, he recognises that his interest "removed her from, while it grew out of , the common and coarse things surrounding her" (I, xxii, 259).

"Little," Sylvère Monod has said, is "the most characteristic word in the whole Dickensian vocabulary."[1] In the 1848 Preface to The Old Curiosity Shop Dickens described how he set out "to surround the lonely figure of the child with grotesque and wild but not impossible companions, and to gather about her innocent face and pure intentions, associates as strange and uncongenial as the grim objects that are about her bed when her history is first foreshadowed."[2] The littleness of Little Dorrit has no need of such aids from the grotesque; it is set within the undeniable physical context of the "shame, desertion, wretchedness, and exposure, of the great capital" (I, xiv, 177). And the quality of her goodness, so far from existing (as Little Nell's does) by force of contrast with the

1. Dickens the Novelist, p. 335.
2. C.P., p. 290.

squalid reality of her surroundings, is felt to arise out of them as a part of that reality. When she accompanies her family on the Grand Tour she finds the sumptuousness of Venice and Rome unreal in comparison with the Marshalsea: the Iron Bridge is a more abiding presence than the Bridge of Sighs. Her loyalty to the "lasting realities" (II, iii, 467) of prison life is essentially a loyalty to the human community and human values which had existed in the Marshalsea world, and it serves to add a further dimension to our response to that world. Mr. Dorrit's experience has been degrading, and it takes "Riches" to show just how degrading it has been, but for Little Dorrit and Clennam--and in a different way, for Maggy and the Plornishes--to know misery and failure is also to know the human qualities which flourish perversely in their midst. One thinks of the concluding lines of Edwin Muir's poem, "One Foot in Eden":

> Strange blessings never in Paradise
> Fall from these beclouded skies.[1]

The moral complexity of Dickens' vision in this novel is evident in the diversity of our response to the spectacle of failure and the paradox of success. When Little Dorrit writes to Clennam from Rome she confesses to feeling homesick, "'so dearly do I love the scene of my poverty and your kindness'" (II, xi, 554-55). The conjunction of poverty and kindness, and the vision of life which it implies, is at the very heart of the world which Dickens has

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1. Collected Poems (1960), p. 227.

created with such care and particularity in the early chapters of Little Dorrit.

VI

The problem which Clennam faces, as we have seen, is one of radical discontinuity. He is a middle-aged man who is forced to make new beginnings at a stage when most men are consolidating the habits of a lifetime, and his situation is sufficiently unrepresentative as to assume the proportions of a personal crisis which isolates him within society. Yet it is the prerogative of his uncertainty to ask questions about others' certainty and Clennam, with his persistent "'I want to know'" (I, x, 113), is the first in a series of disinherited and displaced invididuals who, increasingly in Dickens' later novels, act as the consciences of their civilisation. The personal predicament becomes a source of moral and social perception: it is through his own painful consciousness of change and the urgency of his need for self-renewal that Clennam gains insight into the nature of the society in which such problems become acute.

For Clennam's awareness of human mutability is heightened by the many examples of emotional fixity he sees in the life around him. There is his mother, whose whole existence is based upon the denial of change; she is "'shut up from all pleasant change'" (I, xv, 184), and it is her boast that she is "'not subject to changes.

The change that I await her is the great change'" (I, xxix, 340). Her life has been a gradual process of retreat until in her solitary room she is no longer able to recognise the changing seasons:

> 'All seasons are alike to me ...I know nothing of summer and winter, shut up here. The Lord has been pleased to put me beyond all that.' With her cold grey eyes and her cold grey hair, and her immovable face, as stiff as the folds of her stony head-dress,--her being beyond the reach of the seasons, seemed but a fit sequence to her being beyond the reach of all changing emotions. (I, iii, 34)

Clennam comes home to find his mother's house unchanged from his childhood remembrance, with its inhabitant living in bondage to the past; and when she reads to him from the Bible "years seemed to fall away from her son like the imaginings of a dream, and all the old dark horrors of his usual preparation for the sleep of an innocent child to overshadow him" (I, iii, 35-6).

Like Satis House in Great Expectations, the Clennam household is a focus for the atmosphere of secrecy which pervades Little Dorrit. It is the source of "shadow" in a neighbourhood where all the streets seem to be "depositories of oppressive secrets," and at its heart "his mother presided, inflexible of face, indomitable of will, firmly holding all the secrets of her own and his father's life, and austerely opposing herself, front to front, to the great final secret of all life" (II, x, 542-43). His mother's secrecy seems a "paralysis" to Clennam, but it is something he is powerless to penetrate, and in his effort to do so he incurs that transference of guilt which is the fate of those, like Daniel Doyce in his dealings with the Circumlocution Office, who attempt to reduce

obscurity to order--"'It is you, Arthur, who bring here doubts and suspicions and entreaties for explanations, and it is you, Arthur, who bring secrets here'" (II, xxiii, 685).

If Mrs. Clennam's attitude to the past is one of willed memory ("Do Not Forget"), then Flora Finching provides a more comic illustration of a life committed to the past. When Clennam goes to visit her he finds Christopher Casby's house as little changed as his mother's; the "faded scents" of old rose-leaves and lavender strike him on crossing the threshold "like wintry breath that had a faint remembrance in it of the bygone spring" (I, xiii, 145). Old Casby himself is "as unchanged in twenty years and upward, as his own solid furniture--as little touched by the influence of the varying seasons, as the old rose-leaves and old lavender in his porcelain jars"; compared with his portrait as a boy, indeed, "he had changed very little in his progress through life" (I, xiii, 145). Then Flora appears:

> Flora, always tall, had grown to be very broad too, and short of breath; but that was not much. Flora, whom he had left a lily, had become a peony; but that was not much. Flora, who had seemed enchanting in all she said and thought, was diffuse and silly. That was much. Flora, who had been spoiled and artless long ago, was determined to be spoiled and artless now. That was a fatal blow. (I, xiii, 150)

Flora herself is aware of the fact that she is "'fearfully changed'"; intuitively she recognises the kind of contrast which her middle age makes with the unchanged Patriarch--"'look at Papa, is not Papa precisely what he was when you went away, isn't it cruel and unnatural of Papa to be such a reproach to his own child ...'" (I, xiii,

150-51). Clennam observes that she "left about half of herself at eighteen years of age behind, and grafted the rest on to the relict of the late Mr. F; thus making a moral mermaid of herself" (I, xiii, 155). She babbles on about the "'dear old days gone for ever'":

> Meanwhile Flora was murmuring in rapid snatches for his ear, that there was a time and that the past was a yawning gulf however and that a golden chain no longer bound him and that she revered the memory of the late Mr. F and that she should be at home to-morrow at half-past one and that the decrees of Fate were beyond recall and that she considered nothing so improbable as that he ever walked on the north-west side of Gray's-Inn Gardens at exactly four o'clock in the afternoon. He tried to give his hand in frankness to the existing Flora--not the vanished Flora, or the Mermaid--but Flora wouldn't have it, couldn't have it, was wholly destitute of the power of separating herself and him from their bygone characters. (I, xiii, 159)

Flora's speech symbolises the chaos in Clennam's relationship to his past: it is a grotesque parody of the language of nostalgia, in which the invitation to revive a former love affair is interspersed with garbled snippets of romantic poetry: "'there was a time dear Arthur ...when one bright idea gilded the what's-his-name horizon of et cetera but it is darkly clouded now and all is over'" (II, ix, 536); or this mangled echo from Wordsworth--"'it was the morning of life it was bliss it was frenzy it was everything else of that sort in the highest degree ...'" (I, xxiv, 284-85).[1] She is "always in fluctuating expectation of the time when Clennam would renew his boyhood, and be madly in love with her again" (II, xxiii, 685-86); but this is what he cannot do, and it is the

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1. Cf. The Prelude, XI, lines 108-09.

spectacle of her absurd flirtatiousness which finally brings home to him the impossibility of re-inhabiting the remembered past.

Flora is not alone in her commitment to the world of memory. Mr. F's Aunt, that terrible legacy, is also immured in the past, although a past so deeply buried as to be virtually unintelligible. She has no conception of time, and her random outbursts concern a past which nobody else shares: "'The Monument near London Bridge ...was put up arter the Great Fire of London; and the Great Fire of London was not the fire in which your uncle George's workshops was burned down'" (I, xiii, 159). Like so many of the characters in this novel her existence is submerged, turned in upon itself. Casby, too, has a somnambulistic air about him; he is a silent hypocrite--"So grey, so slow, so quiet, so impassionate, so very bumpy in the head" (I, xiii, 146)--and when Clennam first sees him sitting in an armchair revolving his thumbs, the impression is one of absorbed immobility. His behaviour is habitually indirect: "he disposed of an immense quantity of solid food with the benignity of a good soul who was feeding some one else" (I, xiii, 158). He is even a rogue by proxy, as Pancks makes plain in his unmasking.

This quality of immobility, of a resistance to change and life's variety, is the peculiar characteristic of the imaginative world Dickens has created in Little Dorrit: it is the defining feature of the Marshalsea--"Changeless and barren, looking ignorantly at all the seasons with its fixed, pinched face of poverty and care ..." (II, xxxiv, 815)--and of the Circumlocution Office, where immobility

has been raised to the level of an art. Here again the dominant mood is one of stasis. We have the sense of a society which has become encased in its own ritual, and the brilliance of Dickens' satire lies in his perception of the fact that this is literally impenetrable: far from being sensitive to criticism, the Circumlocution Office is incapable of understanding the grounds on which criticism could be based. It is the microcosm of a class which is no longer able to communicate with those outside its own ranks, the public symbol of a way of life that has its mouldering outposts in the stinking Mews off Grosvenor Square where the Tite Barnacles live, or in Hampton Court, where elderly members of the clan preserve political attitudes in keeping with the cramped gentility of their surroundings.

In the previous novels the social villains had been guilty of sins of commission, men like Dombey and Gradgrind; even the Chancery lawyers were active in propagating the confusion which made work for them. But now, in Little Dorrit, the ills of society are seen to arise from a fundamental moral and legislative paralysis. Mr. Merdle, for instance, is a passive villain, "detained in the clutch of giant enterprises" (I, xxi, 249). He operates in the shadow of "Society," and while it is in the nature of the social world to enlarge his projects he himself derives no personal satisfaction from them. "'I simply request you to care about nothing--'" his wife advises him, "' or seem to care about nothing--as everybody else does'" (I, xxxiii, 397). In the effort to maintain the stasis which respectability requires, the man's essential energy is thwarted.

He has none of Dombey's dignity of psychic vitality; instead his inner life is withdrawn, secretive, perverted--a fact which Dickens suggests in his coarse appearance. Mr. Merdle "looked a little common ...as if, in the course of his vast transactions, he had accidentally made an interchange of heads with some inferior spirit" (I, xxxiii, 394); his blood is "turbid" and he "oozed sluggishly and muddily about his drawing-room, saying never a word" (II, xii, 570). His nervousness is expressed in petty acts of stealth, as when he attempts to fit a table-spoon up his sleeve at the Barnacle dinner.

The self-restraint which "Society" forces on Merdle--"clasping his wrists as if he were taking himself into custody" (I, xxxiii, 394)--is only one manifestation of its power of inhibition. This is everywhere in the novel: in the willingness with which Fanny Dorrit forgoes her own instinctive life to spite Mrs. Merdle by marrying Edmund Sparkler; in Mrs. General, High Priestess of the social proprieties, for whom suppression is a raison d'etre and in whose presence "Passion was to go to sleep ...and blood was to change to milk and water" (II, ii, 450); in the tyranny which retainers exert over their employers. When Mr. Dorrit tells Amy that "people in an exalted position, my dear, must scrupulously exact respect from their dependants" (II, iii, 463), he is echoing a fear which many of the characters share. As qualities of inwardness become devalued the stewards of the outer life come into a new prominence, and it is left to Merdle's Chief Butler, himself

"notoriously captivated by the charms of a certain Duchess" (II, xvi, 613), to pronounce his master's epitaph on behalf of society: "'Sir, Mr. Merdle never was the gentleman, and no ungentlemanly act on Mr. Merdle's part would surprise me'" (II, xxv, 708).

The fixity of the public world mirrors that of the private, and neither is capable to providing adequate answers to the questions which Clennam asks. It is characteristic of Dickens' commitment to "the real in its most intense form" which Forster noted, that Clennam's attempt to redeem the past should be conceived in terms of human relationship; ultimately there is no "city of the mind" for him, he can only renew himself through love. Flora, Pet Meagles, and Little Dorrit each offer a different kind of reconciliation with time: with Flora it is a hopeless retreat into the past, with Pet Meagles the chance to recreate a youthful love affair in middle life; only Little Dorrit is capable of that understanding of change which makes real change possible. As these patterns are worked out in the novel Dickens makes what is perhaps his greatest statement on the problems of time and suffering.

VII

Pet Meagles is as firmly associated with the country and Twickenham as Little Dorrit is with London and the Marshalsea. She is compared to the garden at her home, which is "as fresh and beautiful in the May of the Year, as Pet now was in the May of her

life" (I, xvi, 191), and her freshness and beauty is the source of her attraction for Clennam. Gradually, however, he comes to realise that her youth is also a disqualification, that it makes sympathy with his predicament impossible for her, and that (in Daniel Doyce's words) she is "'too young and petted, too confiding and inexperienced, to discriminate well'" (I, xxvi, 308). It is with the death of this hope already in his mind that he travels down to Twickenham in Chapter xxviii of Book I, "Nobody's disappearance," to meet Pet for the last time before her marriage to Gowan:

> A tranquil summer sunset shone upon him as he approached the end of his walk, and passed through the meadows by the river side. He had that sense of peace, and of being lightened of a weight of care, which country quiet awakens in the breasts of dwellers in towns. Everything within his view was lovely and placid. The rich foliage of the trees, the luxuriant grass diversified with wild flowers, the little green islands in the river, the beds of rushes, the water-lilies floating on the surface of the stream, the distant voices in boats borne musically towards him on the ripple of the water and the evening air, were all expressive of rest. In the occasional leap of a fish, or dip of an oar, or twittering of a bird not yet at roost, or distant barking of a dog, or lowing of a cow--in all such sounds, there was the prevailing breath of rest, which seemed to encompass him in every scent that sweetened the fragrant air....Between the real landscape and its shadow in the water, there was no division; both were so untroubled and clear, and, while so fraught with solemn mystery of life and death, so hopefully reassuring to the gazer's soothed heart, because so tenderly and mercifully beautiful. (I, xxviii, 332-33)

Like all such descriptive set-pieces in Dickens, this passage tells us less about the countryside itself than about the feelings which the country can inspire "in the breasts of dwellers in towns." Clennam stands outside the scene, imparting his own elegaic mood and defeated emotion to the natural fertility of the landscape;

the rich somnolence of the rhythms affirm, not growth, but rest, the "sense of being lightened of a weight of care." Twickenham symbolises Clennam's relation to Pet Meagles--the refuge from disillusionment which he hopes to find in her, and the collapse of that hope in the realisation (which their meeting in this chapter confirms) that she, involved in the process of her own growth, is incapable of understanding the needs of his middle age. The landscape communicates a sense of ending, the "solemn mystery of life and death," which by accustoming the watcher to the inevitability of change, soothes the heart with the promise of ultimate rest.

Pet appears with some roses in her hand, and what she tells him confirms Clennam in his belief that he is "a very much older man who had done with that part of life" (I, xxviii, 334). When they emerge from the avenue in front of the house, "the trees seemed to close up behind them in the darkness, like their own perspective of the past" (I, xxviii, 337), and at the end of the chapter Pet's roses, "pale and unreal in the moonlight, floated away upon the river; and thus do greater things that once were in our breasts, and near our hearts, flow from us to the eternal seas" (I, xxviii, 338). Like the flowers on the river Pet is caught in the current of life, and the implication is that she will become--if not a faded peony like Flora--then equally the victim of change. Her youth and innocence alone offer no refuge from the flux of time.

In the 1868 edition of Little Dorrit Dickens added "The Roses" as a running title to this scene between Clennam and Pet

Meagles, and as John Holloway has pointed out,[1] there is a pattern of floral imagery in the novel relating the three women in Clennam's life. "Flora's Old Flowers" is a running title in Chapter xxiii of the second Book, and "Some Fresh Flowers" in Chapter xxix, where Little Dorrit returns to nurse him in the Marshalsea. These titles underline a complex opposition between town and country which runs throughout Little Dorrit. It is not simply that Dickens sets the fallen world of London against the "free air and the free country swept by winds and wings of birds" (II, x, 542), although this is certainly a theme of the novel; it is, rather, that he gives a moral depth here to the feeling which the country inspires in those condemned to live in the city. Dickens is the great poet of the urban pastoral, but in none of his previous books is the town-dweller's yearning for country places expressed with such diversity of humour and pathos. There is, for instance, the rural solace which young John Chivery finds amongst the washing in his mother's backyard--"'Says he feels as if it was groves!'" (I, xxii, 257)--or the Plornish's "Happy Cottage," where the need to preserve an imaginative link with the countryside is the expression of the human capacity for hope, made poignant by their utter commitment to Bleeding Heart Yard: "To come out into the shop after it was shut, and hear her father sing a song inside this cottage, was a perfect Pastoral to Mrs. Plornish, the Golden Age revived" (II, xiii, 574). Even Mr. Dorrit, for whom "'gardens are--hem--are not accessible'" (I, viii, 84), regales the company

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1. Little Dorrit, Penguin English Library edition (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1967), p. 912.

at Mrs. Merdle's banquet with the scenic recommendations of the Marshalsea:

> 'Welcome to the Marshalsea! The space is--ha--limited--limited--the parade might be wider; but you will find it apparently grow larger after a time--a time, ladies and gentlemen--and the air is, all things considered, very good. It blows over the--ha--Surrey hills. Blows over the Surrey hills.' (II, xix, 647)

Little Dorrit is a child of the city, and her glimpses of the country are brief--the meadows and "green lanes" where she walked as a child with old Bob, a patch of sky seen through the windows of the prison. Yet she knows what it is to want such things, and so it is that she can help Clennam. The flowers which Pet Meagles picks float away upon the river, but those Little Dorrit brings for him in the Marshalsea signify healing and regeneration. In the midst of his fever he is roused by "some abiding impression of a garden" and wakens to find "a wonderful handful of the choicest and most lovely flowers" on the table by his bed.

> Nothing had ever appeared so beautiful in his sight. He took them up and inhaled their fragrance, and he lifted them to his hot head, and he put them down and opened his parched hands to them, as cold hands are opened to receive the cheering of a fire. (II, xxix, 755-56)

It is a fine moment in the novel, a quiet but perceptible turning-point. These are the cut blooms of the city, but they prove to be more precious than the luxuriant growths of Twickenham. Like the blue violets in Sons and Lovers which Paul Morel buys for his ailing mother during their visit to Lincoln, Little Dorrit's flowers symbolise a will to renewal. Only she can minister to Clennam's sick will because she alone knows what it is to want to move from

the consequences of the past into the future. And so the paradoxical attributes of their profoundly compromised experience finally operate in the direction of life: "As they sat side by side in the shadow of the wall, the shadow fell like light upon him" (II, xxix, 758). Recuperation takes place in the Marshalsea and not, as so often in Dickens' novels, in the country. The moral pattern of Little Dorrit is fulfilled in Clennam's realisation that the fallen world of the city, not Twickenham, is the place where growth and renewal are possible for him; and as he listens to Little Dorrit reading he hears in her voice "all that great Nature was doing, heard in it all the soothing songs she sings to man" (II, xxxiv, 815). The wheel has come full circle from the days of his childhood and his mother's vengeful readings from the Old Testament.

In this novel about coming to terms with time, the question "How are we to account for what time has made of us?" is received differently by each of the characters. Mrs. Clennam attempts to deny the influence of time, Flora Finching to circumvent it by escape into the past. Mr. Dorrit, whose career is the most poignant example of the impossibility of escaping from the consequences of the past, is given the illusory freedom of "Riches" only to collapse before the unalterable reality of his prison experience:

> And from that hour his poor maimed spirit, only remembering the place where it had broken its wings, cancelled the dream through which it had since groped, and knew of nothing beyond the Marshalsea. When he heard footsteps in the street, he took them for the old weary tread in the yards. When the hour came for locking up, he supposed all strangers to be excluded for the night. When the time for opening came again, he was so anxious to see Bob, that they were fain to patch up a narrative how that Bob--many a year dead then,

> gentle turnkey--had taken cold, but hoped to be out to-morrow, or the next day, or the next at furthest. (II, xix, 649)

In the end it is the sheer weight of those years spent in the prison which disinherits him from life outside, the "impurity" of his confinement "worn into the grain of his soul" (I, xix, 228). His daughter recognises this in Venice, with the realisation that "no space in the life of man could overcome that quarter of a century behind the prison bars" (II, v, 478). When he breaks down at Mrs. Merdle's Society dinner and calls for old Bob, the world of the Marshalsea reasserts itself; Mrs. Bangham supplants Mrs. General, and his last act is to send off his watch, then his buttons and rings, to an imaginary pawnbrokers. Yet this final reversion is human and right, and it is, paradoxically, the world of the prison with all its degradation which seems more real than the society world that it so indecorously interrupts.

In Little Dorrit, then, where the influence of the past reaches out in so many directions to control the present, the hero and heroine emerge as the two characters capable of understanding the workings of time and thus of surviving its dominance. It is their capacity to face and accept what time has done to them which finally releases them from the bondage of the past. For change is ultimately an ambiguous concept in this novel: the biological process which the river represents is irreversible and meaningless, yet Little Dorrit's capacity to remain unchanged by fortune, to keep faith with the "lasting realities" of the Marshalsea, makes Clennam's imprisonment a time of release. The willed memory of

Mrs. Clennam and the fanciful escapism of Flora may both be sterile, yet when Frederick Dorrit protests to his brother in Venice "'Have you no memory? Have you no heart?'" (II, v, 485), he is asserting the claims of those whose loyalty has made the past endurable, testifying to the moral qualities which suffering has engendered and which must be recognised if prosperity is to have any meaning. The monotony of imprisonment kills all that is creative in the human soul, yet the scene of poverty is also the scene of kindness, and there is renewal within the walls of the Marshalsea for Clennam who, accepting the "shadow," is blessed by "light."

The nature of this reconciliation may suggest a religious meaning, and certainly the final note of acceptance is something which Milton, for example, would have understood: "Good and evill we know in the field of this World grow up together almost inseparably; and the knowledge of good is so involv'd and interwoven with the knowledge of evill and in so many cunning resemblances hardly to be discern'd, that those confus'd seeds, which were impos'd on Psyche as an incessant labour to cull out and sort asunder, were not more intermixt."[1] But the religious dimension is present as a background rather than a framework: it is there in the tranquil summer twilight which follows on Mrs. Clennam's resurrection, when "great shoots of light streamed among the early stars, like signs of the blessed later covenant of peace and hope that changed the

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1. Areopagitica, ed. J.W. Hales (Oxford, 1886), pp. 17-18.

crown of thorns into a glory" (II, xxxi, 793); or in the large perspectives of time and eternity which frame the action and confer a measure of dignity on even the weakest lives--"The two brothers were before their Father; far beyond the twilight judgments of this world; high above its mists and obscurities" (II, xix, 652).

The inwardness of Little Dorrit's ending is conceived in terms of a retreat from society, and here we can see an important expression of Dickens' changing outlook. After the hero and heroine are married, they go "quietly down into the roaring streets, inseparable and blessed" (II, xxxiv, 826); the hostility of the outside world ("the noisy and the eager, and the arrogant and the froward and the vain") follows them in their escape into a "modest life of usefulness and happiness," and it is significant that this note of isolation should be sounded at the end of Dickens' most pessimistic social satire. For Little Dorrit is not just an attack on the evils of a particular society--evils which in Dombey and Son, Bleak House, and Hard Times were amenable to legislative action and moral reform--it is a judgment on the whole process of human combination by which civil society is constituted. As in Book IV of Gulliver's Travels, the satire reaches beyond correction and reproof to express what is in effect a tragic philosophy of social life. The revulsion from society in Little Dorrit is a direct consequence of the work's preoccupation with the personal issues of time and change, and it initiates a new phase of Dickens' career; the "roaring streets" of London become the haunted thoroughfares of

Paris in the Revolution, and ultimately the scene of Bradley Headstone's tormented wanderings. As Little Dorrit and Clennam go down, "inseparable and blessed," into their hostile society, the last words of the book are spoken by the verger: "'this young lady is one of our curiosities, and has come now to the third volume of our Registers'" (II, xxxiv, 826). His volumes are a silent witness to the inexorable cycle of change on which human life is bound, trapped in time between the past and the future: "'But what makes these books interesting to most people is--not who's in 'em, but who isn't--who's coming, you know, and when. That's the interesting question'" (I, xiv, 177).

CHAPTER V

THE PERSISTENCE OF THE PAST: *A TALE OF TWO CITIES* AND *THE UNCOMMERCIAL TRAVELLER*

"It would have been difficult by a far brighter light, to recognise in Doctor Manette ...the shoemaker of the garret in Paris. Yet, no one could have looked at him twice, without looking again: even though the opportunity had not extended to the mournful cadence of his low grave voice, and to the abstraction that overclouded him fitfully, without any apparent reason. While one external cause, and that a reference to his long lingering agony, would always ...evoke this condition from the depths of his soul, it was also in its nature to arise of itself, and to draw a gloom over him, as incomprehensible to those unacquainted with his story as if they had seen the shadow of the actual Bastille thrown upon him by a summer sun, when the substance was three hundred miles away."

(*A Tale of Two Cities*, II, iv, 74)

I

Although Little Dorrit represents an honest and indeed courageous attempt on Dickens' part to face his ghosts, it was not followed by any permanent resolution of his personal problems. In April 1856 he had written to Forster of his nostalgia for the "old days": "Shall I ever, I wonder, get the frame of mind back as it used to be then?...I find that the skeleton in my domestic closet is becoming a pretty big one."[1] The skeleton continued to grow and eventually, in May 1858, Dickens separated from his wife. The months leading up to the separation were a time of almost unbearable restlessness for him. "I want to escape from myself," he wrote to Wilkie Collins in August 1857, suggesting a country jaunt, "For when I do start up and stare myself seedily in the face ...my blankness is inconceivable--indescribable--my misery amazing."[2] The same autumn he confessed to Forster that he had "no relief but in action. I am become incapable of rest. I am quite confident I should rust, break, and die, if I spared myself. Much better to die, doing."[3]

This desperate need for "action" and "doing" is one manifestation of that "crisis of the will" which Lionel Trilling has suggested Dickens was passing through at the time of writing Little Dorrit.[4] Dickens was an activist, but in these years he seems to have come to question this aspect of his personality. The intract-

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1. Forster, p. 639.
2. N, II, 873; letter of 29 August 1857.
3. Forster, p. 638.
4. "Introduction" to L.D., p. XIV.

able personal and social problems of Little Dorrit are resolved by a retreat from the world of action into a "modest life of usefulness and happiness". Clearly Dickens endorses the passivity of his hero and heroine as they go "quietly down into the roaring streets, inseparable and blessed," (II, xxxiv, 826) and it may be that in the character of Mr. Meagles, the indignant practical man, he was giving a wry commentary on his own activism. There was a strain of Meagles in Dickens' response to contemporary society--one sees it, for instance, in an article he wrote at this time entitled "Why"[1]--but increasingly he realised that indignation was not an all-sufficient response, and that the simple unassuming helpfulness of an Amy Dorrit or a Joe Gargery was a different, and possibly better, state. Perhaps, indeed, as Dickens understood himself better he recognised that his social indignation was not altogether disinterested, but had its origin in the memory of his own sufferings; and he may have come to see, as K.J. Fielding has suggested, that "in trying to escape from himself by writing about his own society he was also expressing his own problems that had originated in childhood."[2]

Certainly, some such development took place in Dickens' thinking at this time, for he became much more self-conscious about exploiting the reformist side of his personality. There is a marked decline in his direct involvement with public affairs in the late eighteen-fifties, and a corresponding change in the character of his journalism. The Uncommercial Traveller articles,

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1. H.W., XIII, 1 March 1856, 145-48; M.P., pp. 580-86.
2. "Dickens and the Past," p. 108.

which I shall be examining later in this chapter, are altogether more private and introspective than his earlier contributions to Household Words, and show how deeply Dickens had withdrawn into himself by 1860. But this process was a gradual one, and in the years after Little Dorrit he made a furious effort to escape from himself and his past. The energies which had impelled his campaign against social injustice were now channelled into public activities of a different kind: amateur theatricals and public Readings. For although Dickens was drawn to the "modest life of usefulness and happiness" which Clennam finds at the end of Little Dorrit, he was also, unlike Clennam, a man of intense energy and will, and the habit of resignation was foreign to his temperament. Forster acutely observed that Dickens' early sufferings had bred in him "something even hard and aggressive ...a sense that everything was possible to the will that would make it so,"[1] and that this quality militated against a mature acceptance of the inevitable limitations of life:

> His early sufferings brought with them the healing powers of energy, will, and persistence, and taught him the inexpressible value of a determined resolve to live down difficulties; but the habit, in small as in great things, of renunciation and self-sacrifice, they did not teach; and, by his sudden leap into a world-wide popularity and influence, he became master of everything that might seem to be attainable in life, before he had mastered what a man must undergo to be equal to its hardest trials.[2]

Increasingly in Dickens' later fiction we encounter the problem of the human will in conflict with all that is not "attain-

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1. Forster, p. 38.
2. Forster, pp. 635-36.

able in life," and a corresponding interest in the idea of "renunciation and self-sacrifice" as a possible escape from the problems of the self. It is a central theme of his next novel, A Tale of Two Cities (1859), and partly explains the satisfaction he derived from acting the part of Wardour in Wilkie Collins' melodrama, The Frozen Deep. Collins wrote this play in 1856 for the New Year festivities at Tavistock House, and it was performed publicly in July and August 1857 in aid of Douglas Jerrold's widow. Dickens played the part of Richard Wardour, a man who saves his rival and dies in the arms of the woman he loves, and it is clear that he enjoyed this rôle because it allowed him to achieve, so to speak, a public cartharsis of his private tensions. Like Dickens himself, Wardour is plagued by a lost happiness: "I must wander, wander, wander--restless, sleepless, homeless--till I find her! Over the ice and over the snow ...awake all night, awake all day--wander, wander, wander, till I find her!"[1] (These words acquire an added personal resonance when one remembers that Ellen Ternan had played the part of Lucy Crayford in the Manchester performances in August, with her sister Maria playing opposite Dickens as the heroine, Clara Burnham.[2]) Like Dickens also, Wardour is a man of strong will and energies who can only lose himself in violent activity: "Hard work, Crayford, that's the true Elixer of our life! Hard work that stretches the muscles and sets the blood a-glowing, that

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1. Under the Management of Mr. Charles Dickens: His Production of "The Frozen Deep", ed. Robert Louis Brannan (Ithaca, New York, 1966), p. 157. This is a reconstruction of the script for the 1857 production, hereafter cited as Frozen Deep.
2. Frozen Deep, p. 69.

tires the body and rests the mind!"[1]

But The Frozen Deep is a dismal play, and one can only understand the intensity of Dickens' involvement in it, I think, if one sees it as an experience which allowed him simultaneously to exercise his will and to renounce it. As the manager, he could organise the actors, direct the performance, arrange every detail of the staging from the scenery down to the smallest prop on the set; and yet, in the play itself, he could move the audience to tears by an heroic display of self-sacrifice. It was, paradoxically, only by a supreme public exercise of his will that Dickens could achieve the renunciation of the will which he desired. And even then, part of his satisfaction was a feeling of power and domination:

> All last summer I had a transitory satisfaction in rending the very heart out of my body by doing that Richard Wardour part. It was a good thing to have a couple of thousand people all rigid and frozen together, in the palm of one's hand--as at Manchester--and to see the hardened Carpenters at the sides crying and trembling at it night after night.[2]

A similar impulse drove him to embark on a series of paid public Readings from his works, the first of which began on 29 April 1858. Forster had objected to this idea, considering it a "substitution of lower for higher aims" and unworthy of his status as a gentleman. Dickens replied by asking him to consider it "apart from all likings and dislikings, and solely with a view to its effect on that particular relation (personally affectionate and like no other man's)

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1. Frozen Deep, p. 135.
2. Letter of 7 December 1857, to Mrs. Richard Watson; reprinted in "More Letters to the Watsons," ed. F.P. Rolfe, Dickensian, XXXVIII (1942), 190.

which subsists between me and the public."[1] Clearly his theatrical experiences had given him a taste for a more direct relationship with his public, one which could be personal without involving the intimacy of fictional self-revelation which he had attempted in Little Dorrit. And, as Dickens wrote to Wilkie Collins, "the mere physical effort and change of the Readings would be good," allowing him to escape from himself.[2] What started out as a therapeutic public activity proved to be a huge popular success and, like The Frozen Deep, these Readings gave Dickens a gratifying confirmation of his own powers: "it is a great sensation to have a large audience in one's hand," he confessed to Miss Coutts in August 1858.[3]

II

The peculiarities of Dickens' next novel, A Tale of Two Cities (1859), are partly explained by this furious public effort to escape from his private tensions. In the Preface to the First Edition, he revealed that the "main idea" of the story had come to him while acting in The Frozen Deep: "A strong desire was upon me then, to embody it in my own person ...Throughout its execution, it has had complete possession of me; I have so far verified what

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1. Forster, p. 646.
2. N, III, 14; letter of 21 March 1858.
3. Coutts, p. 360; letter of 9 August 1858.

is done and suffered in these pages, as that I have certainly done and suffered it all myself."[1] During his performance as Wardour he had experienced a "strange feeling ...like writing a book in company,"[2] and A Tale of Two Cities might be described as an attempt to recreate in fiction the intensity of dramatic simplification which he had achieved in Collins' melodrama. As Dickens himself recognised, it is a work in which character is sacrificed to incident:

> I set myself the little task of making a picturesque story, rising in every chapter, with characters true to nature, but whom the story should express more than they should express themselves by dialogue. I mean in other words, that I fancied a story of incident might be written (in place of the odious stuff that is written under that pretence), pounding the characters in its own mortar, and beating their interest out of them.[3]

But although character is drastically simplified in this novel, a principal interest of the story is the way in which, as K.J. Fielding points out, "Dickens uses so many simple characters to express his own complex sense of life."[4] The autobiographical patterns in A Tale of Two Cities emerge, not in a central reflective figure like Arthur Clennam, but in a series of characters--Dr. Manette, Sydney Carton, Charles Darnay--each of whom embodies different aspects of Dickens' dilemma: the problem of the past, the idea of self-sacrifice as an escape from the dominance of the will, the possibility of reconciliation in romantic love. By

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1. C.P., p. 319.
2. N, II, 825; letter of 9 January 1857, to Sir James Tennent.
3. Forster, p. 730.
4. Charles Dickens, p. 203.

involving these characters in the violence of revolution Dickens was able to express the turbulence of his inner feelings without, as in Little Dorrit, confronting them directly.

There are, however, several important areas of continuity between Little Dorrit and A Tale of Two Cities. Both are concerned with time and the past, and it is interesting to observe that there are some preliminary notes for the later novel among the "Memoranda Book" entries for Little Dorrit. On page one, for instance, we find a note which anticipates Carton's relationship with Stryver: "The drunken?--dissipated?--what?--Lion--and his Jackall and Primer--stealing down to him at unwonted hours." And on page five there are a series of titles for a "story in two periods" which includes "Memory Carton"; these rejected titles for A Tale of Two Cities all centre around the passage of the years: "Time!", "The Leaves of the Forest," "Five and Twenty Years," "Scattered Leaves," "Years and Years," "The Great Wheel," "Rolling Years," "Round and Round," "Day after Day," "Felled Trees," "Old Leaves," "Memory Carton," "Old and New Leaves," "Rolling Stones," "Leaves of Years," "Dried Leaves," "Fallen Leaves," "Long Ago," "Two Generations," "Far Apart," "Many Years' Leaves." As the book developed it was Dr. Manette, not Carton, who became the man haunted by memory, and the theme of imprisonment in the past reappears in the Bastille prisoner who is "recalled to life."

Philip Collins has argued that Dickens' treatment of Manette was informed by memories of a visit he had paid in 1842 to the

famous Cherry Hill Penitentiary in Philadelphia, and he goes on to suggest that there is also a "close relationship between Manette and his creator."[1] Dickens was forty-seven in 1859, and at the beginning of the story Manette is "a man of five-and-forty by years" (I, iii, 12); his sufferings have aged him prematurely but when roused by his daughter "he became a handsome man, not past the prime of life" (II, ii, 60). After his rehabilitation to life Manette remains--like Redlaw, Clennam, and Dickens himself--a haunted man, susceptible to every echo from the distant past:

> It would have been difficult by a far brighter light, to recognise in Doctor Manette, intellectual of face and upright of bearing, the shoemaker of the garret in Paris. Yet, no one could have looked at him twice, without looking again: even though the opportunity of observation had not extended to the mournful cadence of his low grave voice, and to the abstraction that overclouded him fitfully, without any apparent reason. While one external cause, and that a reference to his long lingering agony, would always--as on the trial--evoke this condition from the depths of his soul, it was also in its nature to arise of itself, and to draw a gloom over him, as incomprehensible to those unacquainted with his story as if they had seen the shadow of the actual Bastille thrown upon him by a summer sun, when the substance was three hundred miles away. (II, iv, 74).

Only Lucy has"the power of charming this black brooding from his mind. She was the golden thread that united him to a Past beyond his misery, and to a Present beyond his misery ..." (II, iv, 74).

Manette is of course a much less complex study of incarceration in the past than William Dorrit, and Dickens treats him with greater objectivity: he is more of an obvious psychological "case"

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1. Dickens and Crime, p. 137.

and there is a corresponding interest in the therapy which will cure him of his bondage to the past. At this stage of his career Dickens seems to have envisaged a violent break with the past as a possible cure for the self-destructive powers of memory, and we can see a symbolic enactment of this idea in the scene where Mr. Lorry hacks the shoemaker's bench to pieces, "while Miss Pross held the candle as if she were assisting at a murder ..." (II, xix, 195). Dickens made a somewhat similar effort to exorcise his own past in September 1860, when he burnt all his old letters and papers in the field behind Gad's Hill.[1]

A Tale of Two Cities is also concerned with time in an historical sense, but this is the least rewarding aspect of the novel. Dickens' ideas on the French Revolution were largely derived from Carlyle, and he had little to add to the latter's deterministic view of the historical process. His social message is a simple one: intolerable conditions lead to anarchy and anarchy is self-destructive. "Six tumbrils roll along the streets. Change these back again to what they were, thou powerful enchanter, Time, and they shall be seen to be the carriages of absolute monarchs, the equipages of feudal nobles, the toilettes of flaring Jezebels ...Crush humanity out of shape once more, under similar hammers, and it will twist itself into the same tortured forms" (III, xv, 353). What is interesting, however, is the attempt to write a "story in two periods," the use of an historical event to point a contemporary moral about social revolution. In the next chapter

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1. See Johnson, II, 963.

we shall see that Great Expectations has a similar historical dimension, and that Dickens' contemporary meaning is intimately related to his faithful recreation of an earlier period--the early years of the nineteenth century in which he and his generation had grown up. Dickens' sense of history in A Tale of Two Cities may be crude, but when his historical imagination was stimulated by his own memories, as it was in Great Expectations, then it produced what is perhaps his greatest commentary on the Victorian experience.

The violence of revolution makes for an even greater contrast between the private and the public world than in Little Dorrit. The "roaring streets" have become hostile and alien, the individual life correspondingly embattled. It is frequently said that Dickens worked off "his own neurotic impatience and anger" in the mob-scenes of A Tale of Two Cities, and that he "danced and slaughtered with the crowd."[1] But the dominant mood is surely one of fear and distrust of the mob: the court-room crowd at Darnay's trial is likened to a swarm of "great blue-flies" (II, iii, 62); the St. Antoine mob is a dehumanised force, a "sea of black and threatening waters, and of destructive upheaving of wave against wave, whose depths were yet unfathomed and whose forces were yet unknown" (II, xxi, 209). By contrast the individual characters lead fugitive and threatened lives. Dr. Manette's house in Soho is "a very harbour from the raging streets," but also "a wonderful place for echoes" (II, vi, 86), where Miss Pross can hear the

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1. House, Dickens World, p. 214.

footsteps of "Hundreds of People" coming to take Lucie away from her. (There is a macabre irony in the fact that Miss Pross, who is so sensitive to these echoes, becomes deaf as a result of the pistol shot which kills Madame Defarge.)

The impression of solitariness at the heart of A Tale of Two Cities is reinforced by Dickens' sense of the mysteriousness of the human personality. The central characters are not only isolated from the violent world around them but also, to a large extent, from one another. When Dr. Manette tells Charles Darnay that "'mysteries arise out of close love, as well as out of wide division'" (II, x, 128), he is expressing the loneliness which comes between even the closest human ties in the novel. The narrator makes the same point more explicitly at the opening of the third chapter:

> A wonderful fact to reflect upon, that every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other. A solemn consideration, when I enter a great city by night, that every one of those darkly clustered houses encloses its own secret; that every room in every one of them encloses its own secret; that every beating heart in the hundreds of thousands of breasts there, is, in some of its imaginings, a secret to the heart nearest it! Something of the awfulness, even of Death itself, is referable to this....My friend is dead, my neighbour is dead, my love, the darling of my soul, is dead; it is the inexorable consolidation and perpetuation of the secret that was always in that individuality, and which I shall carry in mine to my life's end. (I, iii, 10)

The formal limitations of a "story of incident" did not allow Dickens that detailed exploration of human mystery which he later achieved in Great Expectations and Our Mutual Friend. The sense of life's complexity in A Tale of Two Cities is conveyed not in the psychology of the individual characters, but in the often

ambiguous supra-narrative connections that exist between them. W.J. Harvey's notion of "psychic decomposition" is relevant here, the process whereby "an artist's vision of the world is such that it decomposes and splits into various attributes which then form the substance of disparate characters."[1] This definition could be applied to many of Dickens' novels, but it is particularly relevant, I think, to A Tale of Two Cities and Great Expectations. In the duality which exists between Charles Darnay and Sydney Carton, or between Pip and Orlick, we can see something of the complexity which Dickens had come to feel about character and its dramatisation in the novel.

It will be recalled that at the time of writing Little Dorrit Dickens had complained to Forster about the hypocritical public morality which prevented a novelist from treating "the experiences, trials, perplexities, and confusions inseparable from the making or unmaking of all men."[2] He never directly asked to be released from the conventions of the Victorian novel, and in many ways these conventions suited the peculiarly subversive bent of his genius. The "walking gentleman" type of young hero appears in Dickens' work to the very end, but increasingly in the later novels he is displaced from the centre of the stage by a more morally ambivalent character. The gloom which surrounds the marriage of Clennam and Amy Dorrit suggests the difficulty Dickens found in reconciling the seriousness of his vision with the conventional happy ending,

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1. Character and the Novel (1965), p. 124.
2. Forster, p. 716; letter of 15 August 1856.

and it is perhaps the last romantic relationship in the novels which is felt to offer real possibilities of renewal for the central figure. By the time of A Tale of Two Cities this figure has, as it were, split into two: we have a conventional and colourless hero in Charles Darnay, but the novel really belongs to his slightly disreputable double, Sydney Carton, the outsider whose final act of self-sacrifice allows Darnay's married life with the heroine to continue. In the different rôles which these two related characters play, one can sense a conflict of imaginative sympathy within Dickens himself between the conventional hero and the outsider, between a need to believe in the possibility of the happy ending and the encroaching pessimism of his vision.[1]

Charles Darnay is given Dickens' first name and the initial of his surname, but there can be no doubt that it is Carton who is closest to the novelist himself. "I must say that I like my Carton," Dickens wrote to Mary Boyle in December 1859, "And I have a faint idea sometimes, that if I had acted him, I could have done something with his life and death."[2] Like Clennam, Carton suffers from an impairment of the will, and as a consequence has made a premature retreat from life; he confesses to Lucie Manette that she "has stirred old shadows that I thought had died out of me. Since I

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1. "If I were soured," he wrote to Miss Coutts, who was worried that his personal unhappiness was beginning to show in his art, "I should still try to sweeten the lives and fancies of others, but I am not--not at all" (Coutts, p. 370; letter of 8 April 1860).

2. I am grateful to Mrs. Madeline House for permission to quote from this hitherto unpublished letter.

knew you, I ...have heard whispers from old voices impelling me upward, that I thought were silent for ever" (II, xiii, 144). But he is also a man of ability whose gifts have turned sour, and there is a note of frustrated energy in his resignation to defeat which we do not find in Clennam. This emerges strongly at the end of the novel when, the decision to sacrifice his life for Darnay made, Carton loses his habitual languor and manipulates the lives around him with a force of will which recalls the commanding authority Dickens himself had displayed as a threatrical producer. As he exchanges clothes with Darnay in La Force, Carton is a transformed man: "With wonderful quickness, and with a strength both of will and action, that appeared quite supernatural, he forced all these changes upon him. The prisoner was like a young child in his hands" (III, xiii, 333).

This strange mixture of passivity and energy, of willlessness and proud authoritative activity, is the clearest indication of the intimacy which exists between Carton and his creator, and it is surely significant that Dickens should have felt the impulse to act out this character in person, as he had done with Richard Wardour in The Frozen Deep. Just as his impersonation of Wardour's dying act of self-sacrifice had given Dickens a sense of his own theatrical powers ("It was a good thing to have a couple of thousand people all rigid and frozen together, in the palm of one's hand"), so at the end of A Tale of Two Cities Carton's latent energies emerge, and he comes to full stature as a character. He remains behind in the prison with Darnay's ribbon tied behind his own unruly hair, while

his double is rushed away with Lucie to England and safety. The intensity with which Dickens wills the happy ending is shown in the abrupt transition to the first-person plural--"Look back, look back, and see if we are pursued!" (III, xiii, 339)--but it is Carton who dominates the ending. His act of self-sacrifice is also a supreme assertion of self, and the more conventional characters pale into insignificance beside him.

In fact, the ending of A Tale of Two Cities is ambiguous, and its ambiguity corresponds to Dickens' own conflicting responses to the idea of renunciation and self-sacrifice. From one point of view Carton's death can be seen as a sacrifice to the happy ending, in which the outsider makes it possible for the better life of Lucie and Darnay to continue. Dickens clearly intends a Christian meaning here: by losing his life Carton will save it, he will be "resurrected" in their memory. And yet the outsider steals the show, as Dickens himself had done in his performance as Wardour; Carton is so much more vital and interesting than those for whom he dies that we tend to feel it is he, not Darnay, who deserves to live. His death is a kind of suicide and it is moving not because of his final spiritual affirmation--"'It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done'" (III, xv, 358)--but rather for the sense we have of the misdirected energies and thwarted potential which lead him, self-destructively, to the guillotine. The conflict remains unresolved: life asserts itself even in the act of willing death. To see this is to recognise that as a study in self-sacrifice, A Tale of Two Cities will not stand comparison with,

for example, The Wings of the Dove. Defeat at the hands of life was not a theme which came as easily to Dickens as it did to James, and we can perhaps see a reason for this in the reflections which he gives to Charles Darnay in the condemned cell:

> His hold on life was strong, and it was very, very hard to loosen; by gradual efforts and degrees unclosed a little here, it clenched the tighter there; and when he brought his strength to bear on that hand and it yielded, this was closed again. There was a hurry, too, in all his thoughts, a turbulent and heated working of his heart, that contended against resignation. (III, xiii, 329)

III

If A Tale of Two Cities is the product of Dickens' restlessness in the late eighteen-fifties, then there is an altogether quieter and more introspective note in the Uncommercial Traveller pieces which he started to publish in All the Year Round in 1860. Dickens wrote these articles intermittently during the final decade of his life, and they form the bulk of his known journalistic writings in this period; in addition to the light they shed on his changing attitudes to social issues, they are of considerable interest as autobiographical documents. My concern here is principally with the first Uncommercial Traveller series, the seventeen articles which he wrote in 1860 and published in book-form in 1861. These are rich in memories of his childhood, and provide evidence of yet another upsurge of interest in his past.

By 1860 Dickens had settled at Gad's Hill and had become some-

thing of a country squire there. Gad's Hill was (as he wrote to Wills before purchasing it) "literally a 'dream of my childhood'";[1] situated at the highest point on the road between Gravesend and Rochester, it offered a virtual panorama of the landscape of his earliest memories, "with a distant river stealing steadily away to the ocean, like a man's life."[2] And it is this sense of the wheel come full circle, of a return to the starting-place, which many of the Uncommercial Traveller articles communicate. In "Travelling Abroad," for instance, he describes an imaginary journey during which he encounters "a very queer small boy" on the road "midway between Gravesend and Rochester":

> "Holloa!" said I, to the very queer small boy, "where do you live?"
> "At Chatham," says he.
> "What do you do there?" says I.
> "I go to school," says he.
> I took him up in a moment, and we went on. Presently, the very queer small boys says, "This is Gad's-hill we are coming to, where Falstaff went out to rob those travellers, and ran away."
> "You know something about Falstaff, eh?" said I.
> "All about him," said the very queer small boy. "I am old (I am nine), and I read all sorts of books. But do let us stop at the top of the hill, and look at the house there, if you please!"
> "You admire that house?" said I.
> "Bless you, sir," said the very queer small boy, "when I was not more than half as old as nine, it used to be a treat for me to be brought to look at it. And now, I am nine, I come by myself to look at it. And ever since I can recollect, my father, seeing me so fond of it, has often said to me, 'If you were to be very persevering and were to work hard, you might some day come to live in it.' Though that's impossible!" said the very queer small boy, drawing a low breath, and now staring at the house out of window with all his might.

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1. Lehmann, Charles Dickens as Editor, p. 158; letter of 9 February 1855.
2. "Tramps," A.Y.R., III, 16 June 1860, 234; U.T., p. 114.

> I was rather amazed to be told this by the very queer small boy; for that house happens to be my house, and I have reason to believe that what he said was true.[1]

This imagined encounter with his childhood self takes on an added significance when one remembers that, less than six months later, Dickens was at work on Great Expectations. A familiar pattern can once again be discerned, and just as the two previous autobiographical novels had been stimulated by a confrontation with the past, so Great Expectations too has its origins in this almost symbolic return through time and space to the "dream" of his childhood.

Apart from their considerable autobiographical interest, the Uncommercial Traveller papers show evidence of a marked change in the character of Dickens' journalism. The social indignation of his earlier contributions to the Examiner and Household Words has given way to a gentle, compassionate concern with the outcasts of society; when he visits Wapping Workhouse it is not to castigate the system, but to commiserate with the officials in their struggle to provide for the poor out of inadequate means.[2] The large public issues now claim his attention less than the neglected by-ways of suffering and squalor--the doss-houses of Liverpool in "Poor Mercantile Jack," or the "Great Tasmania's Cargo" of sick and dying soldiers.[3] There is no polemic in Dickens' response to these

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1. A.Y.R., II, 7 April 1860, 557; U.T., pp. 61-2.
2. A.Y.R., II, 18 February 1860, 392-96; U.T., pp. 18-28.
3. "Poor Mercantile Jack," A.Y.R., II, 10 March 1860, 462-66; U.T., pp. 40-51. "The Great Tasmania's Cargo," A.Y.R., III, 21 April 1860, 37-40; U.T., pp. 73-82.

things, and the ground-tone of the book is one of personal sadness and nostalgia, modulated by a fascination with death. "Whenever I am at Paris," he confesses in "Travelling Abroad," "I am dragged by invisible force into the Morgue";[1] and the opening paper describes a visit to the scene of a shipwreck in Wales, where the bodies of the drowned had been laid out in the local church: "The eye, with little or no aid from the imagination, could yet see how the bodies had been turned, and where the head had been and where the feet. Some faded traces of the wreck of the Australian ship may be discernible on the stone pavement of this little church, hundreds of years hence, when the digging for gold in Australia shall have long and long ceased out of the land."[2]

The presence of the Uncommercial himself gives a unity to these occasional papers which makes the book as a whole an interesting companion-piece to Sketches by Boz. "He describes London like a special correspondent for posterity," Bagehot wrote of Dickens in 1858,[3] but whereas it was the teeming, vulgar life of the pre-Victorian city that he had celebrated in Sketches by Boz, the London of the Uncommercial Traveller is a city of the dead, haunted by time and the past. In "The City of the Absent" he describes the "attraction of repulsion" which makes him visit the old City churchyards. In one of them he comes across an old couple hay-making: "Gravely among the graves, they made hay, all

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1. A.Y.R., II, 558; U.T., p. 64.
2. "The Shipwreck," A.Y.R., II, 28 January 1860, 323; U.T., p. 7.
3. "Charles Dickens," Literary Studies (Everyman Ed., 1911), II, 176.

alone by themselves. They looked like Time and his wife."[1] And in "Night Walks" he imagines the hosts of the city's dead coming back to crowd the living inhabitants out of London:

> Westminster Abbey was fine gloomy society for another quarter of an hour; suggesting a wonderful procession of its dead among the dark arches and pillars, each century more amazed by the century following it than by all the centuries going before. And indeed in those houseless night walks--which even included cemeteries where watchmen went round among the graves at stated times, and moved the tell-tale handle of an index which recorded that they had touched it at such an hour--it was a solemn consideration what enormous hosts of dead belong to one old great city, and how, if they were raised while the living slept, there would not be the space of a pin's point in all the streets and ways for the living to come out into. Not only that, but the vast armies of dead would overflow the hills and valleys beyond the city, and would stretch away all round it, God knows how far.[2]

Deserted by the living and haunted by the dead, London also figures in the Uncommercial Traveller as an Arcadian city of almost rural quietness. "Being in a mood for complete solitude and uninterrupted meditation," "Arcadian London" begins, "I have taken a lodging for six weeks in the most unfrequented part of England--in a word, in London."[3] And it is to the deserted areas of the capital that the Uncommercial is drawn--to the "shy neighbourhood" where the stray animals live, or to the lonely chambers of Gray's Inn, "that stronghold of Melancholy" and "Sahara desert of the law."[4] He is caught by the mysterious spell of the old London churches, "at the heart of the world's metropolis, unknown to far greater numbers

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1. A.Y.R., IX, 18 July 1863, 494; U.T., p. 235.
2. A.Y.R., III, 21 July 1860, 351; U.T., pp. 132-33.
3. A.Y.R., III, 29 September 1860, 588; U.T., p. 159.
4. "Shy Neighbourhoods," A.Y.R., III, 26 May 1860, 155-59; U.T., pp. 94-103. "Chambers," A.Y.R., III, 18 August 1860, 452-56; U.T., pp. 136-47.

of people speaking the English tongue, than the ancient edifices of the Eternal City, or the Pyramids of Egypt." These deserted churches have a particular fascination for Dickens; they are symbols of time and the past, where the dead citizens pervade the atmosphere like snuff, and where "in all those dusty registers that the worms are eating, there is not a line but made some hearts leap, or some tears flow, in their day. Still and dry now, still and dry! and the old tree at the window with no room for its branches, has seen them all out."[1] Symbols, too, of the forces of history and change:

> There are few more striking indications of the changes of manners and customs that two or three hundred years have brought about, than these deserted churches. Many of them are handsome and costly structures, several of them were designed by WREN, many of them arose from the ashes of the great fire, others of them outlived the plague and the fire too, to die a slow death in these later days. No one can be sure of the coming time; but it is not too much to say of it that it has no sign in its outsetting tides, of the reflux to these churches of their congregations and uses. They remain like the tombs of the old citizens who lie beneath them and around them, Monuments of another age.[2]

One of the strongest impressions which the Uncommercial Traveller conveys is of Dickens' prodigious walking powers, as he strides through the Kent countryside in summer or, like Bradley Headstone, through the deserted streets of London at night, when "the wild moon and clouds were as restless as an evil conscience in a tumbled bed, and the very shadow of the immensity of London seemed to lie oppressively upon the river."[3] In his loitering

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1. "City of London Churches," A.Y.R., III, 5 May 1860, 89; U.T., p. 92.
2. A.Y.R., III, 89; U.T., pp. 92-3.
3. "Night Walks," A.Y.R., III, 21 July 1860, 349; U.T., p. 129.

mood he confesses that "no gypsy on earth is a greater vagabond than myself," and he has a special affection for the cheapjacks and gypsies who stop at the milestone outside Gad's Hill, where the children play among the carts while their parents cook some food--"Bless the place, I love the ashes of the vagabond fires that have scorched its grass!"[1]

In "Night Walks" Dickens tells how he cured a mood of restlessness by getting up directly after lying down, and going out for a walk through the city which brought him home exhausted at dawn. It is a remarkable piece, which betrays not only the intense strain under which he must have been living at this time, but also that strange "attraction of repulsion" which continually drew him back, at the height of his fame and prosperity, to the haunted landscape of his childhood sufferings. Calling himself "Houselessness," he describes a characteristic journey across Waterloo Bridge to the empty theatres and Newgate, where he stops "to linger by that wicked little Debtor's Door--shut tighter than any other door one ever saw--which has been Death's Door to so many."[2] Then on across London Bridge to the King's Bench and Bethlehem Hospital, where he reflects that the sane and the insane are both equal at night, and wonders that "the great master who knew everything, when he called Sleep the death of each day's life, did not call Dreams the insanity of each day's sanity."[3] In these journeys Dickens is drawn to the other houseless creatures

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1. A.Y.R., III, 156; U.T., p. 95. "Tramps," A.Y.R., III, 16 June 1860, 234; U.T., p. 114.
2. A.Y.R., III, 350; U.T., p. 130.
3. A.Y.R., III, 350; U.T., p. 132.

of the night--drunkards, a ragged youth asleep on the steps of St. Martin's Church, the children scavenging amongst the offal in Covent Garden Market--and he takes comfort from the toll-keeper at Waterloo Bridge, who "rattled the change of halfpence down upon that metal table of his, like a man who defied the night, with all its sorrowful thoughts, and didn't care for the coming of dawn."[1]

We can reasonably assume that some of the "sorrowful thoughts" which occupied Dickens on these night walks still centred on his own childhood and youth. "Night Walks" follows "Dullborough Town," in which he records his dienchantment at revisiting Rochester, and indeed everywhere in the Uncommercial Traveller the pressure of the past weighs upon the present. The old City churches speak to him of time and of his own childhood churchgoing, when like Pip he had been "caught in the palm of a female hand by the crown" and "violently scrubbed from the neck to the roots of the hair as a purification for the Temple."[2] The sight of two lovers during a drowsy service reminds Dickens of himself at the age of eighteen, when he had gone with his "Angelica" (surely Maria Beadnell) into a church to escape from the rain--

> ...and when I said to my Angelica, "Let the blessed event, Angelica, occur at no altar but this!" and when my Angelica consented that it should occur at no other--which it certainly never did, for it never occurred anywhere. And O, Angelica, what has become of you, this present Sunday morning when I can't attend to the sermon; and, more difficult question than that, what has become of Me as I was when I sat by your side.[3]

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1. A.Y.R., III, 349; U.T., p. 129.
2. "City of London Churches," A.Y.R., III, 85; U.T., p. 83.
3. A.Y.R., III, 87; U.T., pp. 88-89.

The sense of departed glories is strongest in "Dullborough Town," which was originally called "Associations of Childhood"--a suitably Wordsworthian title for this return to "the scenes among which my earliest days were passed."[1] Dickens had left Dullborough in a stage-coach to follow his family to London and the scene of his father's bankruptcy: the same stage-coach and the same journey which Pip takes in Chapter xx of Great Expectations--"The journey from our town to the metropolis was a journey of about five hours. It was a little past mid-day when the four-horse stage-coach by which I was a passenger, got into the ravel of traffic frayed out about the Cross Keys, Woodside Wood-street, Cheapside, London" (xx, 153). "Dullborough Town" reveals the autobiographical basis for this and other episodes in the novel:

> I call my boyhood's home ...Dullborough. Most of us come from Dullborough who come from a country town.
> As I left Dullborough in the days when there were no railroads in the land, I left it in a stage-coach. Through all the years that have since passed, have I ever lost the smell of the damp straw in which I was packed--like game--and forwarded, carriage paid, to the Cross Keys, Wood-street, Cheapside, London? There was no other inside passenger, and I consumed my sandwiches in solitude and dreariness, and it rained hard all the way, and I thought life sloppier than I had expected to find it.[2]

Disappointed expectations hang heavily over "Dullborough Town." The golden Rochester of Pickwick has become a backward provincial town, and Dickens records these changes with an ironic nostalgia: the playing-fields have been swallowed up by the

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1. A.Y.R., III, 30 June 1860, 274-78; U.T., pp. 116-126. - Perhaps there is also an affinity with De Quincey, cf. "The Affliction of Childhood," Collected Writings, ed. D. Masson (Edinburgh, 1889-90), I, 35-49.
2. A.Y.R., III, 274; U.T., p. 116.

Railway Station; the stage-coach ("Timpson's Blue-Eyed Maid") has been replaced by S.E.R. engine No. 97; Timpson's picturesque coaching-office has given way to Pickford's utilitarian warehouse. "I have not the honour of Pickford's acquaintance, but I felt that he had done me an injury, not to say committed an act of boyslaughter, in running over my childhood in this rough manner ..."[1] As Dickens passes through the town he turns an amused eye on such encroachments of the Victorian Age as the Mechanics' Institution, a draughty monument to the self-improvement idea where, he is gratified to find, the more improving works moulder on the shelves; and he visits the old Theatre only to discover that "it was mysteriously gone, like my own youth."[2] The desperate improvisations of the provincial theatre were to be satirized in Great Expectations, and there is perhaps a hint of Mr. Wopsle's Hamlet in Dickens' recollections here of the Dullborough Theatre, where "the witches of Macbeth bore an awful resemblance to the Thanes and other proper inhabitants of Scotland; and ...the good King Duncan couldn't rest in his grave, but was constantly coming out of it and calling himself somebody else."[3]

In a place where everything else has changed, Dickens is reassured to come across the greengrocer at whose house he had attended a lying-in as a child. But his delight is short-lived: the man has only a dim recollection of the incident, and he shows

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1. A.Y.R., III, 275; U.T., p. 118.
2. A.Y.R., III, 276; U.T., p. 121.
3. A.Y.R., III, 276; U.T., pp. 120-21.

himself unsympathetic to Dickens' nostalgia:

> Nettled by this phlegmatic conduct, I informed him that I had left the town when I was a child. He slowly returned, quite unsoftened, and not without a sarcastic kind of complacency, Had I? Ah! And did I find it had got on tolerably well without me? Such is the difference (I thought, when I had left him a few hundred yards behind, and was by so much in a better temper) between going away from a place and remaining in it. I had no right, I reflected, to be angry with the greengrocer for his want of interest. I was nothing to him: whereas he was the town, the cathedral, the bridge, the river, my childhood, and a large slice of my life, to me.[1]

In the end, however, Dickens' pilgrimage is rewarded by a return of the past, in the shape of an old companion of his schooldays. There is a poignant, almost Proustian moment of recognition, when "the air was filled with the scent of trodden grass, and the perspective of years opened, and at the end of it was a little likeness of this man keeping a wicket, and I said, 'God bless my soul! Joe Specks!"[2] Specks is now the local doctor, and he invites Dickens to come for dinner and meet his wife, who had been a childhood sweetheart of the Rochester days:

> So I saw her, and she was fat, and if all the hay in the world had been heaped upon her, it could scarcely have altered her face more than Time had altered it from my remembrance of the face that had once looked down upon me into the fragrant dungeons of Seringapatam. But when her youngest child came in after dinner ...I saw again, in that little daughter, the little face of the hayfield, unchanged, and it quite touched my foolish heart. We talked immensely, Specks and Mrs. Specks, and I, and we spoke of our old selves as though our old selves were dead and gone, and indeed indeed they were--dead and gone as the playing-field that had become a wilderness of rusty iron, and the property of S.E.R.[3]

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1. A.Y.R., III, 276; U.T., pp. 119-20.
2. A.Y.R., III, 277; U.T., p. 124.
3. A.Y.R., III, 278; U.T., p. 125.

Despite their nostalgia for the past Dickens' meeting with Specks and his wife "illuminated Dullborough with the rays of interest that I wanted and should otherwise have missed in it, and linked its present to its past, with a highly agreeable chain"; and when he returns alone to the Railway Station, he reflects that it is unjust to quarrel with the place for being changed from his recollections when he himself had come back so altered: "All my early readings and early imaginations dated from this place, and I took them away so full of innocent construction and guileless belief, and I brought them back so worn and torn, so much the wiser and so much the worse!"[1]

Dickens' regret at the passing of his innocence is a familiar note, and it presages another fictional attempt to come to terms with the past. His return to Rochester before writing Great Expectations, like his meeting with Maria Beadnell before Little Dorrit, was an encounter with the remembered past, and in both cases the memory was contradicted by the realities of change. Just as Maria was transformed from Dora into Flora, so Rochester loses the radiance with which it had been invested in Pickwick; it becomes "our town," the drab provincial environment which Dickens and men like him had left for the city, inspired by "great expectations." Dullborough is the town of Wopsle and Pumblechook and Mrs. Joe, but also of Joe Gargery, Dickens' most moving tribute to the innocence which he felt he had lost in his worldly rise. We can see in Great Expectations (which itself grew out of an auto-

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1. A.Y.R., III, 278; U.T., pp. 125-26.

biographical Uncommercial Traveller piece) his final effort to redeem the past, to bring together the lost innocence of the Rochester days with his sufferings in the blacking warehouse and the disillusionment of his middle age.

CHAPTER VI

GREAT EXPECTATIONS: THE PAST REDEEMED

"We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time."

(T.S. Eliot, "Little Gidding,"
Four Quartets)

I

Great Expectations (1860-61) would be a central document in any discussion of Dickens' response to his times, but it has a particular relevance to the present enquiry. Throughout this study I have stressed the interdependence of autobiographical preoccupation and social concern in the genesis of Dickens' mature fiction. We have seen how the upsurge of interest in his own past which produced, in the late eighteen-forties, his unfinished autobiography, The Haunted Man, and David Copperfield, went hand in hand with a deepening awareness of--and absorption in--contemporary affairs; how the process was mutually reinforcing, with Dickens turning from the composition of his autobiographical novel to write scathing articles on the Drouet scandal for the Examiner, and then back again to his fiction. And I have suggested that the reconciliation which Dickens made with the past in David Copperfield, while it initiated the most active phase of his journalism and provided the stimulus for two great, confident social satires--Bleak House and Hard Times--was in fact temporary and precarious, that it broke down in the mid-eighteen-fifties, and that in Little Dorrit there is evidence of a transformation in his attitude to both the contemporary scene and his own past. Thereafter the character of his journalism changes, and his interest in public affairs declines, yet the more private and inward-looking character of many of the Uncommercial Traveller pieces suggests that Dickens

is still haunted by the past, and still concerned to find a pattern in his life which will reconcile his successful but troubled middle age with the lost childhood that continues to fascinate him.

At this crucial stage in his career Dickens returned once again to a first-person narrative in the sentimental education manner, and in doing so achieved a unique synthesis of these two related strands in his art, the autobiographical and the satirical. In this chapter I want to argue that Great Expectations is Dickens' most profound commentary on Victorian civilisation and values because it represents the most radical evaluation of his relationship to the past. The correspondences are by no means obvious, but to understand the contemporary interests at work in this novel is to see a uniquely representative personal perspective at its heart--a perspective which makes Great Expectations not only Dickens' most comprehensive satire on his world, but also the most complete expression (and hence perhaps the final working-out and exorcism) of his own most intimate experience.

II

It may help to begin by comparing David Copperfield and Great Expectations. Dickens himself was well aware of possible similarities between the two novels. "To be quite sure I had fallen into no unconscious repetitions," he wrote to Forster in

October 1860, "I read David Copperfield the other day, and was affected by it to a degree you would hardly believe...." Characteristically it was the earlier work that moved him; his references to Great Expectations stress only the drollness of his "grotesque tragi-comic conception":

> I have made the opening, I hope, in its general effect exceedingly droll. I have put a child and a good-natured foolish man, in relations that seem to me very funny. Of course I have got in the pivot on which the story will turn too--and which indeed, as you remember, was the grotesque tragi-comic conception that first encouraged me.[1]

Dickens' comments on Great Expectations are hardly revealing, here or elsewhere, yet it is significant that he should have expressed delight in the irony inherent in his "grotesque tragi-comic conception," for this suggests the difference between the two novels. David Copperfield is the story of a middle class child who carves a successful career for himself despite early injustices, and its overall mood is correspondingly optimistic; the hero of Great Expectations is a blacksmith's boy whose efforts to become a gentleman bring him only frustration and disillusionment, and although Pip does achieve in the end a state of self-recognition and a measure of muted happiness, the controlling mood of the novel is one of resignation. Both books deal with the past and with the shaping properties of time, but the passionate nostalgia which characterises David Copperfield is almost entirely absent from the later work, where the narrator's voice is ironic, sceptical, and self-questioning.

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1. N, III, 186.

A more fundamental distinction between the two books can be seen in their respective attitudes to the social underworld. It might be said that David Copperfield, like Oliver Twist, is a fable of disinheritance: a small, inherently genteel child is forced to suffer social degradation, he escapes to the comfort and security of a middle class home, and is then threatened with a return to his former state of insecurity. This is perhaps the most characteristic of all Dickensian nightmares, and has its most naked and terrifying expression in Oliver Twist--in such scenes as Oliver's recapture by Nancy or the invasion of his country retreat by Fagin and Monks, moments when we sense "the nightmare fight between the darkness, where the demons walk, and the sunlight, where ineffective goodness makes its last stand in a condemned world ..."[1] In both Oliver Twist and David Copperfield the nightmare derives its compelling force, I would suggest, from two related emotions: the inner conviction of gentility and thwarted potential which makes the hero miserable in the social underworld, and the terror lest this innate superiority will not be recognised by those (Mr. Brownlow, Aunt Betsey) who are capable of releasing him from bondage. Beyond this there is even a further dimension of fear in the feeling--which both novels manage to suggest and despite, in David Copperfield at least, a conscious resistance on the narrator's part to the idea--that the innocent child has been more deeply implicated in the underworld than is altogether

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1. Graham Greene, "The Young Dickens," Collected Essays (1969), p. 109.

compatible with his recovered middle class status; a suspicion that his fellowship in crime or social degradation has involved him in a secret complicity with the outcast which permanently taints him for respectable company. One recalls David's initial sense of shame at Dr. Strong's Academy: "How would it affect them, who were so innocent of London life and London streets, to discover how knowing I was (and was ashamed to be) in some of the meanest phases of both?"[1] And who has not felt, reading Oliver Twist, that the really sinister menace which Fagin holds for Oliver lies in the consciousness we have of the Jew's strange, paternalistic claim on the young hero?

This nightmare reappears in Great Expectations, but with significant modifications. While Oliver and David are gentlemen by birth and have only to knock on the right door, so to speak, to reclaim their inheritance, Pip is never anything but the blacksmith's boy: the gentility for which he hankers has to be painfully acquired, it is for much of the book precariously held, and although in the end he does succeed in attaining to it, this state is very different from the one he had envisaged in his childhood imaginings--it is finally a moral, and not a social, category. (This subtle evolution of the gentleman idea is one of the most impressive features of Great Expectations and constitutes an important part of the book's contemporary meaning). Pip is not allowed to forget, or ever truly escape from, his rude beginnings;

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1. D.C., xvi, 229.

and whereas David Copperfield enjoys a childhood idyll before his incarceration in his stepfather's warehouse, Pip's early life is telescoped into the opening chapter. His "first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things" (i, 1) is not the affection of a loving mother and a devoted nurse, but the perception of his own utter isolation in a hostile environment--the cold and windswept marshes, the violent irruption of the convict, the hulks, the gibbet, and permeating all a dawning consciousness of guilt and fear.

And Dickens gives a further twist to the fable. The story of David Copperfield's disinheritance still has power to move us partly because of the tension in the hero's mind between the world of the social outsider to which he feels condemned, and the comforts and decency of the middle class family life for which he longs. This tension is interesting because it is not a simple question of black and white: the outsider's world undoubtedly has its seamy side, but qualities of sympathy and fellow-feeling also flourish there. Moreover it exhibits, at moments, certain kinds of human attractiveness lacking in the more respectable society of the novel--one thinks of Micawber's gaiety and his liberating extravagance, and there is the strange paradox that in a novel so preoccupied with marital relations the impecunious Micawbers should provide the one example of a marriage that triumphantly works.[1] Dickens' artistic

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1. There is a similar pattern in Oliver Twist. When Oliver arrives at Fagin's den he is freely offered necessities of life which had hitherto been largely denied to him in the workhouse--food, warmth, shelter. He also encounters there, for the first time, a bizarre underworld version of family life, where Fagin poses as the

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fidelity to his material is such that he is compelled to record these things (Mick Walker's kindness to David, the companionship he finds in the Micawber household), and yet at the same time there is a powerful feeling in the book that the world of the outsider is most dangerous just when it reveals an endearing aspect. It is perhaps significant that the villain in Oliver Twist was named after the real-life Bob Fagin, the boy whose very kindness to Dickens in the blacking warehouse must have threatened to reconcile him to his humiliation.[1]

In Great Expectations, however, there is no such resistance on Dickens' part to the human claims of the underworld. Far from endorsing the sense of class division in Pip's mind, Dickens constantly undermines it; he is not concerned to justify Pip's rise in station, but rather to suggest and analyse the guilt, the inhibition, the personal betrayals which this involves. While David succeeds through a combination of hard work and good fortune, Pip is given the economic basis of the genteel life only to discover in the end that he owes it to a man whose whole history and way of life seems a denial of the refinement to which Pip aspires. In this way the social contrasts which threatened the equilibrium

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protective father, a "merry old gentleman" playing games with his pickpocket children. In fact Fagin performs much the same parodic role in relation to respectable society that Micawber does in David Copperfield. His impersonation of an apprehensive old gentleman--at which Oliver "laughed till the tears ran down his face" (ix, 62)--is juxtaposed with the appearance of Mr. Brownlow in the following chapter. Fagin is a criminal and treacherous father to his boys while Micawber errs through irresponsibility, yet they both provide a comic mimicry of the "respectable" behaviour and attitudes which Dickens holds up for approval elsewhere in the two novels.

1. On this point see John Bayley's excellent essay on Oliver Twist in Dickens and the Twentieth Century, p. 53.

of David's progress are made the very agents of meaning in the later work, and what had been implicit in David's sense of shame--namely that his middle class status had somehow been compromised by his association with the likes of Mick Walker and Micawber--these fears are brought into the open and given objective expression in the plot, in the secret bond of complicity between Pip and Magwitch. But the crowning irony of Dickens' vision, the pivot on which his "grotesque tragi-comic conception" turns, lies in the fact that it is the social outcast, a transported convict and "'hunted dunghill dog'" (xxxix, 304), who is the most impressive figure in the novel and the chief embodiment of those classless qualities of constancy and love which form the moral positives of Great Expectations.

Gissing thought that "no story in the first person was ever better told," and the ironic, remorseful tone in which Pip recounts his life reflects (as the more nostalgic narrative in David Copperfield does not) Dickens' complete control of his material.[1] The novel is shot through with a sense of the interrelatedness of human life which finds a focus in the narrator's troubled conscience: every incident arises from, and relates to, the ambiguities surrounding his rise in station. When Pip first returns to his home-town, for example, he travels on the coach with two convicts, one of whom he recognises as the man who had given him the one-pound notes at the Three Jolly Bargemen. Herbert has come to see him off, and his response to these men is one of unqualified revulsion and disgust--"'What a degraded and vile sight it is!'" And looking at them, Pip can share

1. Charles Dickens: A Critical Study (1898), p. 60.

his friend's perspective:

> The great numbers on their backs, as if they were street doors; their coarse mangy ungainly outer surface, as if they were lower animals; their ironed legs, apologetically garlanded with pocket-handkerchiefs; and the way in which all present looked at them and kept from them; made them (as Herbert had said) a most disagreeable and degraded spectacle. (xxviii, 214-15)

To the born gentleman the convicts in their manacled state are a species apart, something less than human. Yet Pip has reason to know that they are human, and in that secret part of his consciousness where so much of the essential action of Great Expectations takes place, he can feel compassion for them, envisaging the ghastly prison-ship which awaits them at the end of their journey. "In my fancy, I saw the boat with its convict crew waiting for them at the slime-washed stairs,--again heard the gruff 'Give way, you!' like an order to dogs--again saw the wicked Noah's Ark lying out on the black water" (xxviii, 217). On the journey down to Rochester the convicts start to discuss the forgotten incident, and although there is no likelihood that the man will recognise him, Pip is filled with a nameless and undefined terror. Torn between his sympathy for the men and his fear that the convict will somehow know him and so discredit his new-found gentility, Pip leaves the coach on the outskirts of town:

> I could not have said what I was afraid of, for my fear was altogether undefined and vague, but there was great fear upon me. As I walked on to the hotel, I felt that a dread, much exceeding the mere apprehension of a painful or disagreeable recognition, made me tremble. I am confident that it took no distinctness of shape, and that it was the revival for a few minutes of the terror of childhood. (xxviii, 217)

The irony which informs such scenes is masterly in its control and manipulation of class attitudes. Dickens manages simultaneously to suggest and yet withhold the truth about the source of Pip's expectations, so that when Magwitch does declare himself the knowledge comes not only as a startling revelation but--like the catastrophe of Oedipus Rex--as something that has been immanent in the history and behaviour of the central figure. This unity is a feature of the inclusiveness of Dickens' vision. From being peripheral to the hero's progress in David Copperfield, the world of the social outcast becomes central in Great Expectations; it is conceived not as something apart but as the inseparable corollary, the moral counterpart, of middle class life. And in this way the unreconciled ambiguities of the earlier work are recognised and redeemed. "The reappearance of Mr. Dickens in the character of a blacksmith's boy," as Shaw observed, "may be regarded as an apology to Mealy Potatoes."[1]

And yet, in an obvious sense, Mr. Dickens is not the blacksmith's boy, and the very irony which distinguishes Great Expectations from David Copperfield should put us on our guard against drawing explicit comparisons between Pip and his creator. At this stage of his career Dickens had come to be very circumspect about his personal life, and while we may speculate on likely autobiographical parallels--that the novel dramatises his relationship to his public, that it reflects his disillusionment with his sons, that Pip's

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1. "Charles Dickens and Great Expectations," in Majority, 1931-52, ed. Hamish Hamilton (1952), p. 387.

passion for Estella owes its authenticity to Dickens' affair with Ellen Ternan--it must be conceded that these conjectures cannot be substantiated in the way that the personal basis of David Copperfield and Little Dorrit can.[1] Great Expectations is autobiographical in a different sense from David Copperfield; it offers a more symbolic account of his experience, in which memories of the blacking warehouse are fused with those recollections of his early childhood stimulated (as we saw in the previous chapter) by his return to Gad's Hill and Rochester. If David Copperfield tells the story of his life as he wished his public to have it, Great Expectations tells the same story as he himself only gradually came to see it. The difference between the two books--and this in turn reflects the lessons of the great social satires in the intervening decade--lies in Dickens' mature perception that his personal experience, in addition to being individual and unique, was also representative of the culture in which he lived; or rather, that it was individual and unique just because it was representative. The thesis needs to be demonstrated, and yet I would suggest, as a preliminary to the discussion of the novel in its contemporary setting, that this confluence of personal and social vision marks Great Expectations as the central, pivotal work in the Dickens canon, the apotheosis of that long development initiated by Dombey and Son on the one hand and by The Haunted Man and David Copperfield on the other. At once intimate and objectively

1. But see Ada Nisbet, "The Autobiographical Matrix of Great Expectations," Victorian Newsletter, XV (1959), 10-13, who relates the theme of the novel to Dickens' preoccupation with his social status, and to the money mania of his later years.

ironic, with all the authority of a deeply considered theme, Great Expectations is the work which, more than any other, can help us to understand Dickens' attitude to himself and his world.

III

The greatness of Great Expectations, as Lionel Trilling has reminded us, begins in its title: "modern society bases itself on great expectations which, if ever they are realized, are found to exist by reason of a sordid, hidden reality. The real thing is not the gentility of Pip's life but the hulks and the murder and the rats and decay in the cellarage of the novel."[1] Much modern criticism has been preoccupied with the relationship between the cellarage and the drawing-room, between the gentility of Pip's life and the criminal outcast who makes it possible; and discussion has tended to focus on the hero's sense of guilt. "Snobbery is not a crime," Julian Moynahan asks, "Why should Pip feel like a criminal?"[2]

In their attempts to answer this question, two studies in particular stand out: Moynahan's essay and the chapter on Great Expectations in Robert Garis's The Dickens Theatre. Pip is guilty, Moynahan argues, not through association but because he succumbs to a dream of a "profoundly anti-social and unethical nature"; his

1. "Manners, Morals, and the Novel," The Liberal Imagination (1951), p. 211.
2. "The Hero's Guilt: The Case of Great Expectations," Essays in Criticism, X (1960), 60.

career of great expectations is to be seen as essentially criminal because it is founded on a fantasy of love and power which involves him in subconscious aggressiveness toward those who stand in his way. This aggressiveness is defined in the novel by analogy, in the figures of Orlick and Bentley Drummle who act as vengeful surrogates for the violent impulses of the otherwise passive hero. The criminal potential of Pip's expectations, that is to say, is deflected on to melodramatic villains, and in this way Dickens delivers his judgment on "that dream of huge and easy success which has always haunted the imagination of children and also haunted the imaginations of adults in the increasingly commercial and industrial society of nineteenth-century England."[1]

Garis is similarly concerned with the symbolic structure of Great Expectations, with the contrast between what he considers a traditional impersonation of moral self-discovery in Pip's narrative voice, and the deeper "unconscious" meanings which the novel articulates. These he finds to be an embodiment of Freud's thesis in his essay Civilisation and its Discontents:

> It is the story of a hopeful young man with a strong animal body and powerful desires who is called on at every turn to display, in the commonest actions of his everyday life, the ideals of the civilisation into which he was born: continual self-restraint, self-control, forgiveness of enemies, fortitude in withstanding--not heroic combat, which could be invigorating--but boredom and frustration and insult.... Although he has within himself 'sustained ...a perpetual conflict with injustice', this conflict, because his civilisation never offered him a vocabulary for articulating it, was always turned against himself. In his youth it took the form of "kicking [his] injured feelings into the

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1. Moynahan, pp. 69, 77.

> brewery-wall, and twisting them out of [his] hair'; when he grows up he inevitably turns his frustrations against himself in the form of continual remorse and guilt.[1]

Both these essays are exciting, persuasive, and original; both offer satisfactory accounts of the relationship between cellarage and drawing-room in the moral scheme of the novel; and both imply (what many sensitive readers of Great Expectations have felt) that the "unconscious" implications of Dickens' fable are somehow more impressive, more radical, than the "conscious" meanings--that Pip's construction of his life does not altogether circumscribe the book's disturbing insight into the nature of guilt, freedom, and moral responsibility. At the same time, both interpretations illustrate some of the dangers and limitations involved in a critical analysis divorced from historical or cultural background. Much of Garis's case, for example, depends upon his assertion that self-control, self-restraint, denial of impulse, were characteristics of the civilisation into which Pip was born. This seems to me highly disputable. A quality of inhibition is certainly a feature of the later Victorian scene, but Dickens is at pains to indicate that the action takes place in a period before the 1832 Reform Bill. Pip (and Dickens) grew up in the pre-Victorian world, where the texture of daily life was markedly more violent and instinctive than it had come to be by 1860. Indeed what we now consider to be the Victorians' fear of instinct can perhaps only be understood in terms of their emergence from a savage society--a process of

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1. The Dickens Theatre (Oxford, 1965), pp. 211-12.

cultural evolution on which, as we shall see, Great Expectations offers a unique commentary.

K.J. Fielding has voiced similar reservations about Moynahan's theory. Questioning the notion of "critical autonomy," he suggests that "Pip's feeling of the 'taint of prison or crime'...was shared by others who had lived through the first half of the century, and that Pip's own sense of guilt has been rather exaggerated."[1] Certainly this is a case where the literary critic can learn from the social and cultural historian, and vice versa. The intimate meaning of the novel is so bound up with mid-Victorian habits of thought--attitudes to wealth, class, social mobility and so on--that we need all the information we can find about its contemporary context.

This is especially true of the snobbery which is a principal theme of the book. Shaw thought that expansion of the social conscience would make nineteenth century class snobbery seem less natural, and that Great Expectations would consequently lose some of its appeal. The danger at this distance lies in separating Pip's genteel aspirations from the larger context of that widespread impulse to improvement, both personal and social, which is such a crucial factor in the genesis of Victorian Britain. For here, indeed, Great Expectations partakes of a contemporary meaning which we have almost certainly lost with the passage of time, some such meaning as Frederic Harrison shared when, in 1882, he looked back

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1. "The Critical Autonomy of Great Expectations," Review of English Literature, II (1961), 87.

on the nineteenth century and found it to be "the age of great expectation":

> Mr. Carlyle, Mr. Ruskin, the Aesthetes, are all wrong about the nineteenth century. It is not the age of money-bags and cant, soot, hubbub, and ugliness. It is the age of great expectation and unwearied striving after better things.[1]

It may be that we still tend to see the Victorian Age through the eyes of Carlyle and Ruskin, and that in our readiness to discern a criminal potential in Pip's expectations we overlook that sense of hopefulness and promise, even idealism, to which Harrison testifies. For the optimism inherent in his description of the nineteenth century as "the age of great expectation and unwearied striving after better things" plays an important part in Great Expectations, as it did in the real world out of which the book was written.

It is interesting, therefore, to turn from modern interpretations of the novel to a contemporary response, and to find the Athenaeum reviewer of 1861 recognising this representative quality in Pip's "dreams":

> The hero of the tale,--a dreaming, ambitious boy, with a grain of genius in him, and flung out by Fate into a narrow and cramping existence, which in no respect contents his yearnings,--may interest few people; and yet he is true to a life with which many have struggled, and to dreams which have put right, or put wrong, many a better man than himself.[2]

How widespread in mid-Victorian England were the dreams of

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1. "A Few Words About The Nineteenth Century," Fortnightly Review, N.S. XXX (1882), 415.
2. 13 July 1861, No. 1759, p. 44.

success and social emergence which agitate Pip, and what was the contemporary attitude to such "expectations"? John Morley found "vague aims" to be a peculiar characteristic of the eighteen-sixties. "The common effect of a play, a romance, or any other appeal to the imagination, upon young people ...is to fill them with dreams of an heroic and extraordinary future for themselves." And this tendency, Morley thought, was far from enervating:

> The modern view ...is that building castles in the air, if the process is only superintended by reason and common sense, not only does not necessarily dissipate the mind, but may actually exert a vastly more bracing influence upon it than some of the most popular tonics of former times. The tremendous bustle and restlessness which characterise modern society are partly due to the new doctrines on this point. People allow themselves to dream more, and their dreams make them work all the harder.[1]

In so far as these released energies which could be usefully channelled into practical activity, heroic expectations were respectable; the problem for many Victorians was to know where a modest ambition shaded into the snobbery and jockeying for social position which Frances Cobbe, writing in 1864, pronounced to be "the greatest taint and misery of modern life."[2]

The problem is illustrated in an interesting and (for our purposes) highly relevant form in the writings of Samuel Smiles. Taine observed of English society in the eighteen-sixties that "civilisation here is not natural, but acquired," and it is in the context of this struggle to acquire civilisation that Smiles's ideas can provide a valuable contemporary dimension to the reading

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1. Modern Characteristics (1865), pp. 40, 41.
2. "The Nineteenth Century," Fraser's Magazine, LXIX (1864), 482.

of Great Expectations.[1] The notion of the gentleman is central for Smiles, as it was for Dickens, and he is similarly concerned to differentiate between true and false gentility, between the "true gentleman" and the "gent":

> There is an ambition to bring up boys as gentlemen, or rather "genteel" men; though the result frequently is, only to make them gents. They acquire a taste for dress, style, luxuries, and amusements, which can never form any solid foundation for manly or gentlemanly character; ...There is a dreadful ambition abroad for being "genteel." We keep up appearances, too often at the expense of honesty; and, though we may not be rich, yet we must seem to be so. We must be "respectable," though only in the meanest sense--in mere vulgar outward show. We have not the courage to go patiently onward in the condition of life in which it has pleased God to call us; but must needs live in some fashionable state to which we ridiculously please to call ourselves, and all to gratify the vanity of that unsubstantial genteel world of which we form a part.[2]

Self-Help was published in 1859 and this passage comes, significantly, from the chapter on "Money-Use and Abuse." It is a mistake to see this book as the mere glorification of worldly success, for although Smiles believed that "every man's first duty is, to improve, to educate, and elevate himself,"[3] he too was in his way a critic of social snobbery. Individualism is celebrated in his work not for its capacity to achieve material ends, but as a means to self-fulfillment. If one can detect a pattern in the hundreds of examples scattered throughout his writings it would be his admiration for those who have risen from humble origins to the

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1. Notes on England (Second Edition, 1872), p. 321. For a good general discussion of Smiles's philosophy see Asa Briggs, Victorian People (1954), Ch. 5; also his introduction to the Centenary edition of Self-Help (1958), pp. 7-31.
2. Self-Help (1859), pp. 225-26.
3. Thrift (1875), p. 94.

dignity and independence of a productive life. He stressed the capacity of each individual to elevate himself intellectually and morally, and the name he gave to this process--"self-culture"--might well be used to describe the character of Pip's ambition. Smiles would have criticised Pip's snobbery and his easy acceptance of a life based on the earnings of others, but the impulse to civilise oneself that lies behind the hero's behaviour is a motive he understood only too well. Seen in the light of the moral and practical qualities which Smiles sought to inculcate--self-respect, self-control, perseverance, energy, self-discipline--Pip's attempt at self-culture takes on a more sympathetic colouring.

The final chapter of Self-Help is entitled "Character--The True Gentleman", and here again we can sense something of the contemporary field of force within which Dickens was working. The critique of gentility in Great Expectations gains force and definition from the examples of true gentlemanly conduct which the novel offers: Joe Gargery is a gentleman, Dickens is saying, and for the same reasons that Matthew Pocket is one. For Smiles, too, the idea of the gentleman is essentially classless, a question of inward being rather than outer appearance, and in defining those qualities which go to the creation of a gentleman he makes substantially the same point that Dickens is making in the character of Joe:

> There never yet existed a gentleman but was lord of a great heart. And this may exhibit itself under the hodden grey of the peasant as well as under the laced coat of the noble. ...Riches and rank have no necessary connexion with genuine gentlemanly qualities, The poor man may be a true gentleman,--in spirit and in daily life. He may be honest,

> truthful, upright, polite, temperate, courageous, self-respecting, and self-helping,--that is, be a true gentleman. The poor man with a rich spirit is in all ways superior to the rich man with a poor spirit.[1]

Despite this, however, the self-help idea was not altogether free from characteristically utilitarian contradictions, some of which Dickens had already pilloried in the figures of Uriah Heep and Bitzer. It is these contradictions which are brought into prominence in Great Expectations. Initially, Pip's career falls into a classic nineteenth century pattern: like Newcomen and Faraday, two of Smiles's heroes, he is a blacksmith's boy and, like them, he has a "hunger for information" (xv, 102) which the Dame-school in his narrow provincial world fails to satisfy. But whereas the real-life self-helpers elevated themselves by dint of perseverance and self-discipline, Magwitch's anonymous gift provides Pip with the economic basis for a genteel life. It is a significant twist, for by giving his hero the fruits of self-culture without, so to speak, the labour, Dickens is able to concentrate upon the social and sexual implications, and the inherent paradoxes, of the self-improvement idea.

"The pursuit of Knowledge under difficulties" is the 1868 running title to the scene in Great Expectations where Pip arouses his sister's anger by persistent questions about the convict-hulks. The ironic reference is of course to G.L. Craik's Pursuit of Knowledge under Difficulties (1831), a seminal work in the self-

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1. Self-Help, pp. 325, 328. Compare with this Matthew Pocket's belief, as retailed to Pip by Herbert, that "'no man who was not a true gentleman at heart, ever was, since the world began, a true gentleman in manner'" (xxii, 171).

improvement genre which profoundly influenced Smiles, and it is in a novel by the woman who later married Craik that we can most clearly see the contemporary fantasy which Dickens is holding up to scrutiny in Great Expectations. John Halifax, Gentleman, published in 1856, is an uncritical fictional celebration of a poor boy's rise in the world; and being fiction, it reveals several of the unconscious assumptions involved in such a rise. John Halifax is the perfect self-help hero: with no natural advantages, and while employed as a mere labouring-boy, he teaches himself to read and write and, like Smiles's great hero George Stephenson, spends his leisure time constructing models of the machines he is later to employ in his factory.

There are interesting parallels between the two novels. John Halifax, like Pip, feels ashamed of his "'ugly hands'" and of his employment as a tanner's lad, and his social ambitions are likewise confused with a sexual motive: he wants to marry Ursula, although he knows that she is a "gentlewoman" and he only a "tradesman."[1] His friends advise him to respect his station, but John perseveres, marries Ursula, and becomes in time both mill-owner and landed proprietor, with a carriage of his own. He is not, it is true, guilty of Pip's snobbery, and yet throughout the book he is motivated by a consciousness of innate superiority which comes very close to the class consciousness Dickens is scrutinising in

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1. Dinah Mulock (Mrs. Craik), John Halifax, Gentleman (3 vols., 1856), I, xv, 319. Humphry House has also drawn attention to the "sexual element in snobbery": see "G.B.S. on Great Expectations," All In Due Time (1955), p. 207.

Great Expectations. Towards the end John Halifax is about to rehearse the story of his humble origins when his son interrupts him with the comment, "'We are gentlefolks now'"; the hero's reply, "'We always were, my son,'" is quoted by Taine in his chapter on "Landed Proprietors and English Gentlemen," and it illustrates perfectly the ambiguity surrounding the idea of the "gentleman" in self-help literature.[1] For although Mulock is here saying, with Smiles, that the poor man can be a gentleman, that what matters is independence and integrity and dignity, at the same time John Halifax is only secure in social status when he has justified himself by acquiring the symbols of hereditary class--the large estate, the county acquaintance, an aristocratic son-in-law, and so on. Moreover, these achievements figure in the novel as themselves the reward of a lifetime's self-help: success is measured in terms of a breakthrough into a rigid social hierarchy. The creed, one is bound to conclude, was only rarely an end in itself.

Dickens' exploitation of these attitudes in Great Expectations is intimately related to his perception of another important feature of the contemporary scene. The struggle for individual refinement reflects a larger movement in society as a whole; men like Smiles were influential chiefly because they spoke to a generation which was itself acutely conscious of having made enormous advances in the civilisation of everyday life. Dickens' novel, it may help to recall, was published in the same year as the second volume of

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1. Mulock, III, i, 22; Taine, pp. 175-76.

H.T. Buckle's History of Civilisation in England, with its proclaimed faith in the "laws of Progress" and the "mighty career" of English civilisation.[1] The belief in progress which inspired Buckle and his contemporaries was something more than vulgar optimism or self-congratulation, impressive as the record of social reform must have seemed to mid-century observers; behind it lay an awareness that the state of civilisation they had achieved was a unique and recent development, something that had taken place substantially within the lifetime of a large section of the Victorian public.

This historical fact suggests further ways in which Pip's story can be seen as representative of early nineteenth century experience. His exaggerated allegiance to the concept of refinement is entirely characteristic of a culture which had barely emerged from the crude and violent society of the eighteenth century. The Victorians were proud, and rightly, of the improvements they worked in the texture of daily living. As early as 1836 John Stuart Mill was contrasting the civilisation of his day to the "rudeness of former times," and he noted that "the spectacle, and even the very idea of pain, is kept more and more out of the sight of those classes who enjoy in their fulness the benefits of civilisation," whereas in previous times everyone had been habituated to "the spectacle of harshness, rudeness, and violence, to the struggle of one indomitable will against another, and to

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1. I (1858), 212; II (1961), 329.

the alternate suffering and infliction of pain."[1] By mid-century this process of civilisation had become so consolidated that G.R. Porter could write, in the 1851 edition of his Progress of the Nation, that "it is in itself a proof, of no slight significance, as to the general refinement of manners, that in a work of this nature there would be found an impropriety in describing scenes that were of every-day occurrence formerly, and without which description it is yet impossible adequately to measure the advance that has been made."[2]

The proximity to the Victorian age of a violent past, and the contrast which this made with the age's most treasured social achievements, is of the utmost relevance to Great Expectations. On the one hand there is the England of 1860, relatively stable, relatively prosperous, conscious and rightly proud of the considerable advances in civilisation which the previous forty years had seen; and on the other there is the recent memory of a very different world, the harsh and brutal society of the eighteenth century which the Victorian reformers set out to transform and which still survived as a background to their efforts--a source of congratulation but also of uncertainty and fear. Here one can begin to see the contemporary significance of the social ironies in this novel. In making Pip's benefactor a transported convict, and thereby setting his effort at self-culture within a framework

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1. "Civilisation," Westminster Review, XXV (1836), 12.
2. Progress of the Nation (1851), p. 681.

of criminality,[1] Dickens was touching the very nerve of a characteristic mid-Victorian dilemma. For if anything seemed to contradict the new civilisation it was the continued existence within it of violent crime: this raised the vexing question of the relationship between those classes which were "civilised" and those which were manifestly not. What responsibility did the civilised middle class bear for the barbarity which still persisted at the fringes of their society? Was it a blot on their upward progress, or merely the work of a criminal underworld which the march of civilisation would eradicate?

These issues are raised in an article by W.R. Greg in the Edinburgh Review of 1851. Greg was reviewing William Johnston's England as it is (1851), and anxious to counter what he considered to be the pessimistic tenour of the book, set out to explain the increased crime figures Johnston had cited in support of his theory of national decadence. An increase in crime, Greg argued, did not necessarily betoken an increase in criminality, for "crime is, for the most part, committed, not by the community at large, but by a peculiar and distinct section of it;" these "professional criminals" constituted in Greg's view "a class apart," and although they might have increased in number this "in no degree militates against the

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1. Magwitch is of course a criminal only in a technical sense, and Dickens sympathises with him because he has been neglected and oppressed by society. But the important point about him, in terms of the novel's treatment of "civilisation," is the fact that he is violent and animal, and that for much of the book he is invested with the horrors of Pip's childhood vision of him as "a desperately violent man," whom he had seen "down in the ditch, tearing and fighting like a wild beast" (xxxix, 308).

idea of the progress of morality and civilisation among all other classes." The "swollen return of crime is undoubtedly a blot upon our escutcheon and a drawback on our progress; not as impeaching the general honesty and virtue of the nation, but as showing the existence of a class among us which the advance of civilisation ought to have eradicated or suppressed."[1] This view of the criminal as belonging to a "class apart" is a representative contemporary attitude and one which Dickens is holding up to scrutiny throughout Great Expectations; we have already encountered it in Herbert's response to the convicts on the coach, and Pip's uneasiness on this and subsequent occasions may be seen as a dramatisation of the ambiguity inherent in such a response. Greg might reassure his middle class readers with the comforting view of an altogether separate and self-contained criminal population, but Dickens' vision reveals a world in which, we shall see, the hero owes his respectability to his involvement with a criminal outcast.

No amount of background material can take the place of a careful critical reading, but it can provide the context for such a reading; in the case of Great Expectations it puts us back into a world preoccupied with the idea of self-culture, where it is considered commendable for the individual to seek to elevate himself, and where the dream of "great expectation"--that "unwearied striving after better things" which Harrison noted--is looked upon as a respectable aspiration with a practical effect on the energies of the ambitious young. Moreover these contemporary attitudes

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1. Edinburgh Review, XCIII (1851), 330.

mirror the subconscious hopes, fantasies and uncertainties of a society which is still very close to a more primitive past: Pip's hankering after gentility takes on a dimension of pathos and even a certain quality of pioneering idealism when we realise that Victorian snobbery and prudishness were often (to quote from Dr. Kitson Clark) "the result of a struggle for order and decency on the part of people just emerging from the animalism and brutality of primitive society."[1] His extreme sense of class division should be related to the very intensity of his need to civilise himself, and in this Pip is a true child of the early nineteenth century, his awareness of the civilised life sharpened by a knowledge of its very precariousness.

What has been said so far of the contemporary relevance of Great Expectations points to an interpretation which sets it apart from all the other novels that deal directly with Victorian society. Hitherto Dickens had tended to concentrate upon a particular feature of this world--commercial pride in Dombey, utilitarian heartlessness in Hard Times, the moral paralysis of society in Little Dorrit. But Great Expectations is unique among his fiction in that its real subject is not a specific abuse, or a series of related abuses, but nothing less than civilisation itself; more accurately, it is a study in social evolution, a drama of the development of conscience and sensibility in a child who grows up in the early years of the nineteenth century. And in this, as I have argued, Pip's story is truly a representative one. Behind

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1. The Making of Victorian England (1962), p. 64.

John Halifax, Gentleman, Self-Help, Great Expectations--works otherwise so different in attitude and imaginative quality--lies the social experience of the first generation of the Victorian age, a fact that is of crucial significance to the understanding of the novel. For I would suggest that Dickens here deliberately recreated a period of the immediate past which must have survived in the memory of many of his readers, and that it was through the exploitation of this historical dimension that he was able to deliver his most profound and disturbing commentary on contemporary society and values. Once again it is the past, as in David Copperfield and Little Dorrit, which holds the key to the meaning of the present.

IV

Although Great Expectations is concerned with the past in a quite conscious way, the attitude to time and memory in this work is rather different from what we have encountered in the other autobiographical novels. There is little nostalgia for the "old days," and the realisation that they have passed goes unattended by any Wordsworthian regret at the passing of emotional and spiritual vitality. Instead the references to the past are brisk and even topographical in nature, frequently recording some change in the landscape of the novel since the time of the events being described. Thus Dickens is careful to recall that Pip lived in "a wooden house,

as many of the dwellings in our country were--most of them, at that time" (ii, 6); or that Mr. Wopsle's theatre in London was in the "waterside neighbourhood (it is nowhere now) ...(xlvii, 362); or, in the final journey down river, that "the steam-traffic on the Thames was far below its present extent, and waterman's boats were far more numerous" (liv, 413). Sometimes, too, the description of a character will draw attention to the fact that he belongs to another period: Joe's education, we are told, "like Steam, was yet in its infancy" (vii, 41).

These references to a changed and changing world may be small in themselves, but they are sufficiently frequent to constitute a recognisable pattern of retrospection, and when taken in conjunction with certain other period details they enable us to assign a coherent time-scheme to the action. Like Bleak House and Little Dorrit, although more carefully and consistently than either, Great Expectations is set back into the past, into an area of time extending from about 1807 to 1823 or possibly two or three years later.[1] That the novel has this conscious historical dimension, and is not merely informed with a vague and undefined sense of the past, is shown in the prominence Dickens gives to small but telling historical detail--detail which a modern reader might not

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1. It would be difficult, and perhaps pointless, to assign exact dates to each stage of Pip's career, yet Miss Mary Edminson has suggested these historical boundaries and on the basis of the internal evidence she brings forward, I think she has proved her case beyond dispute: see "The Date of the Action in Great Expectations," Nineteenth Century Fiction, XIII (1958), 22-35. I have drawn extensively on her findings in my discussion of this aspect of the novel; all conclusions, and some additional details, are my own.

notice but which to a contemporary would suggest that the way of life described in Great Expectations, and the physical setting in which events take place, did not belong to the date of composition. For example, Dickens twice draws attention to the fact that the "lucifer" match (invented in 1827) did not then exist: at the beginning of the novel when Pip does not dare to rob the pantry by night for fear of the noise of flint on steel, "for there was no getting a light by easy friction then" (ii, 13), and at the end when, down at the lime-kiln, Orlick is still struggling with the old-fashioned tinder box (liii, 401-02). In both instances the action is sufficiently urgent and compelling to make this exact preoccupation with period consistency seem rather superfluous; if, that is, Dickens did not have an ulterior purpose in making it so plain.

The carefully delineated landscape of the novel gives further evidence that this backdating was intentional. In setting the scene for the river chase in the final section Dickens paints a picture of the Thames as it must have been in the first third of the nineteenth century, and he is at pains to avoid any confusion with the London of 1860. "It was Old London Bridge in those days," Pip remarks in Chapter xlvi (p. 360), thereby distancing the final part of the narrative to a period before 1831-32, when the Old Bridge was pulled down and the New opened, and possibly before 1824, the year in which work on New London Bridge commenced. Wemmick's catalogue of bridges up to Chelsea Reach in Chapter xxxvi--"'Let's see; there's London, one; Southwark, two; Blackfriars, three; Waterloo, four; Westminster, five; Vauxhall, six.'" (pp. 276-77)--

suggests a date for this particular section (Pip is 21) not earlier than 1819, when Southwark Bridge was opened, and not later than 1831, when the New London Bridge took over from the old. Indeed the characteristic clarity with which Wemmick delivers this list might indicate a date before 1824, when there was still no question of an 'Old' and a 'New' London Bridge. This meticulous attention to period detail is maintained in all the Thames scenes and even in the river chase, where once again the excitement of the narrative might have caused Dickens to neglect or omit historical fidelity.

His omissions are also revealing. There are no railways in Great Expectations, where all travelling is by coach, and no factories either (there could have been, but at this time they had not begun to dominate industry). The early chapters convey a powerful sense of the precariousness of human life, and here too the novel's mood is faithful to a period in which the rate of human mortality was high: in the second paragraph of the book we are told that Pip and his sister are the only survivors of a family of nine. The "Bloody Code" is still harshly operative. Although the infamous Hulks, condemned by a Parliamentary Committee of 1837, had ceased to exist by the time Great Expectations was published, the air of terror and mystery with which Dickens invests them--"like a wicked Noah's ark" (v, 36)--suggests the earlier years of their operation, when they came to symbolise for many contemporary observers all the ruthlessness of a barbaric criminal code. This is recognisably the Kent landscape through which Cobbett passed in August 1823, when he classified the Hulks along with government

spies, treadmills, and Houses of Correction as emblems of the secret vindictiveness of the country's rulers.[1] There is indeed a Regency flavour about the whole opening section. Dickens is careful to point out, and repeat several times, that the soldiers who appear in Chapter V are in the service of His Majesty, indicating a date before Queen Victoria's accession in 1837, and possibly before the death of George III in 1820; one can even detect evidence of period consistency in Pip's fight with Herbert, where the "pale young gentleman" shows a regard for the formalities of boxing--insisting on the laws of the game and "seconding himself according to form" (xi, 85)--which suggests the golden age of the Prize Ring in the early years of the century.

It seems clear, then, that Dickens deliberately set the action of his novel within the first twenty-five or thirty years of the nineteenth century, and did so in such a way as to emphasise a gradual process of social change leading up to the date of publication. As Miss Edminson remarks, the "emphasis is on change, and this in itself serves to date the action.....When the novel concludes, one is aware that there has been a definite movement in time during the unfolding of the plot, but also that the final years are not those of its composition and publishing. The reader is constantly brought up against transitions which at the time of publication, he might have been expected to remember."[2]

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1. Rural Rides, ed. G.D.H. and M. Cole (3 Vols., 1930), I, 215.
2. "The Date of the Action in Great Expectations," pp. 34-35. In this connection it is interesting to find Dickens, at the time of Great Expectations, registering his surprise at the changes which had overtaken the Thames since the time of his youth. In [Contd.

This conclusion is fascinating in itself, but it raises two further questions which are of central importance to the understanding of Great Expectations: why did Dickens choose this particular historical perspective, and what is the relationship between the dating of the novel and the contemporary (1860) relevance of the subject with which it deals? To answer these questions it is necessary first to consider the way in which Dickens recreates his chosen period, for the historicity of Great Expectations is something more than the sum of the book's historical detail; it is also, and more powerfully, conveyed in the texture of the life described, in the emotions and attitudes which go to make up the action.

V

Pip is at once the most completely individualised and the most typical of Dickens' heroes; he is also the most solitary. "I was always treated," he records in Chapter iv, "as if I had insisted

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a letter to Cerjat of 1 February 1861 he describes a walk he took the previous day from the Houses of Parliament past Millbank: "I walked straight on for three miles on a splendid broad esplanade overhanging the Thames, with immense factories, railway works, and what not erected on it, and with the strangest beginnings and ends of wealthy streets pushing themselves into the very Thames. When I was a rower on that river, it was all broken ground and ditch, with here and there a public-house or two, an old mill, and a tall chimney. I had never seen it in any state of transition, though I suppose myself to know this rather large city as well as anyone in it...." (N, III, 209-10).

on being born in opposition to the dictates of reason, religion, and morality, and against the dissuading arguments of my best friends" (p. 20). Cut off from the past by the death of his parents, and with no point of reference in the present beyond the harsh guardianship of a sister twenty years older, he is in a literal sense the author of his own identity: "I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip" (i, 1). As we have already seen, he experiences none of the childhood happiness and security that David Copperfield knows; his "first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things" is the perception of his own utter isolation within a hostile environment, epitomised by the lonely churchyard where his family lie buried and by the convict whose abrupt and insistent demands he is forced to fulfil. With the birth of consciousness comes the knowledge of fear, insecurity, and helplessness:

> 'Hold your noise!' cried a terrible voice, as a man started up from among the graves at the side of the church porch. 'Keep still, you little devil, or I'll cut your throat!'
>
> A fearful man, all in coarse grey, with a great iron on his leg. A man with no hat, and with broken shoes, and with an old rag tied round his head. A man who had been soaked in water, and smothered in mud, and lamed by stones, and cut by flints, and stung by nettles, and torn by briars; who limped and shivered, and glared and growled; and whose teeth chattered in his head as he seized me by the chin. (i, 1-2)

The convict represents human life at its closest to the animal creation, and thereafter he is inseparable in Pip's mind from the savage marsh landscape out of which he erupts. "'I wish I was a frog,'" he says as Pip leaves, "'Or a eel!'" (i, 4), and

when food is brought for him he gulps it furtively like a dog, expressing his gratitude by a mechanical clicking in his throat, "as if he had works in him like a clock, and was going to strike" (iii, 16).

This note of animality is struck at the outset of Great Expectations and its resonance pervades the whole novel. No other work of Dickens, not even Oliver Twist or Our Mutual Friend, is so impregnated with violence, latent and actual, or so imaginatively aware of the gradations between the primitive and the refined. Magwitch turns Pip upside down, calls him a "'young dog'" (i, 2), and threatens him with vague and unspecified tortures; yet this intimidation is only an extreme version of the treatment he already receives at the hands of other adults. Pip returns home in Chapter II to a household where he has to endure the rigours of his sister's "hard and heavy hand" (ii, 6), arbitrary thrashings from Tickler, violent dosings of Tar-water which make him conscious of "going about, smelling like a new fence" (ii, 10). Mrs. Joe's system of bringing up by hand is sanctioned by a primitive rural society, and it is harsh, unjust, brutalising, and morally diminishing. How essentially pre-Victorian this environment is can be seen in a comparison with the homes of Dombey and Gradgrind. Paul Dombey and the little Gradgrinds grow up in a theoretical age which devalues, and therefore debases, the life of instinct and natural feeling, but Mrs. Joe's regime is at the other extreme from the intellectual tyranny of Gradgrind. Pip is the product of a household in which physical contact predominates to the exclusion

of any idea of mental or spiritual cultivation, and the effect of Mrs. Joe's upbringing is to make him timid and guiltily self-conscious of his own natural gifts of curiosity and intelligence.[1] He is variously punched and scrubbed by his sister, bullied by Pumblechook, distrusted by Jaggers, and openly despised by Estella; Wopsle pokes his hair into his eyes and uses him as a "dramatic lay-figure" to be "mauled" in his "poetic fury" (xv, 102). At the Christmas dinner (surely the bleakest festivity in all Dickens) Pip is made to feel like "an unfortunate little bull in a Spanish arena" (iv, 22), and the efforts of his elders to improve the occasion by comparing his lot with that of the pig they have just eaten, only serve to emphasise the passive degradation of his life. Everyone, with the exception of Joe, conspires to thrust upon Pip the consciousness that he is little better than a young animal: unwanted, troublesome, and--in Mr. Hubble's phrase--"'naterally wicious'" (iv, 23). When Estella slaps his face and calls him a "'little coarse monster'" (xi, 76), she is only giving a social category to a sense of physical and moral humiliation which is already strong within Pip.

The strange meeting which opens this novel is thus of primary significance, not only for the action it initiates, but because it helps to establish a dominant mood and atmosphere for what follows.

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1. Here again the atmosphere of the book is faithful to its historical setting. Pip has indeed to pursue knowledge under considerable difficulties, chief among them being a widespread distrust of the child's desire to learn; witness Mrs. Joe's retort to his persistent questioning in Chapter ii--"'People are put in the Hulks because they murder, and because they rob, and forge, and do all sorts of bad; and they always begin by asking questions'" (p. 12).

Pip's encounter with Magwitch brings to dramatic focus all the violence, the injustice, the physical and moral coercion inherent in his environment, while at the same time providing an emblem of Pip's relationship to his world. He is, we see, a child alone in a society of adults, a society which robs him of human dignity by impressing on him that he is merely a little animal, but which simultaneously makes complicated demands of him, as Magwitch does when he bullies him into stealing from the forge. Pip enlists our sympathies because of his helplessness, and also for his intelligence and pluck; despite the indignities of his upbringing there still burns within him a certain moral delicacy, a basic decency, and a dim perception that life could be otherwise than it is, that it might be possible to have an existence free from the oppression and intimidation which prevail in his sister's house. One might almost say that Pip in these early scenes experiences the basic predicament of the self-help hero, his awareness of his own potential kept alive by the affectionate companionship of Joe and, negatively, by a deep sense of outrage within him, an instinctive knowledge of radical injustice:

> Within myself, I had sustained, from my babyhood, a perpetual conflict with injustice. I had known, from the time when I could speak, that my sister, in her capricious and violent coercion, was unjust to me. I had cherished a profound conviction that her bringing me up by hand, gave her no right to bring me up by jerks. Through all my punishments, disgraces, fasts and vigils, and other penitential performances, I had nursed this assurance; and to my communing so much with it, in a solitary and unprotected way, I in great part refer the fact that I was morally timid and very sensitive. (viii, 57-8)

The tone of the opening chapters is perfectly adapted to expressing this tension between Pip and his environment. The first-person narrative is brilliantly sustained, registering both the remorseful probings of the hero's mature perspective and the immediacy of a child's conflict with strange and incomprehensible forces. The mood is tougher, less nostalgic, than the mood of David Copperfield, and the penitential character of Pip's recollections does not obscure a quality of real aggression in his response to the injustices of his childhood. He longs to pull Wopsle's Roman nose, or fly at Pumblechook, the mere sight of whom makes him "vicious" in his reticence when asked to explain about Satis House (ix, 61).

Nor is there any tolerance for fools in Great Expectations. The comedy which characters like Wopsle and Pumblechook provide is invariably related to their capacity to frustrate or obstruct Pip's life, and even such an obvious comic set-piece as the description of the dame-school is firmly set within the context of his pursuit of knowledge: the very stupidity and ignorance of Mr. Wopsle's great-aunt throws a sympathetic light upon Pip's "hunger for information." We may laugh at her, but Pip's own reaction is sharply dismissive--indeed much of the comedy in this novel derives from the almost disproportionate savagery of the irony which the narrator turns upon these comic figures. She is a "preposterous female" (xv, 102), a "miserable old bundle of incompetence" (xvii, 119); in her death she "successfully overcame that bad habit of living" (xvii, 119). Pumblechook is described with similar scorn

as, variously, a "windy donkey" (lviii, 452), a "fearful impostor," an "abject hypocrite," "that basest of swindlers," "that diabolical corn-chandler" (xiii, 97-8), and so on throughout the book.

Comic irony here expresses the verbal resistance of the physically powerless but sensitive and intelligent child: it is the medium through which his sense of outrage finds a partial release. The very vigour with which Pip dismisses these characters, moreover, leaves the reader in no doubt about how he is to interpret this world. Like Dullborough in the Uncommercial Traveller, this is a backward provincial society peopled by pompous bullies like Pumblechook and, worse, by those who respect Pumblechook and see in him a figure of local dignity and importance. As Pip grows older he becomes increasingly aware of what the narrative irony has implied from the outset: that life in this environment is coarse, violent, frustrating, and humanly demeaning, and that it is profoundly inimical to the realisation of the potential he feels within himself. Yet this recognition is itself a source of guilt and shame, because it involves admitting an inadequacy in the one character who had made his childhood tolerable. Joe Gargery may be said to represent the positive aspects of this otherwise limited world: he is simple and credulous and illiterate, but these limitations are in his case related to a corresponding strength. He is the possessor of a "great nature" (lvii, 442), and in a book where feelings take a violent and sometimes self-destructive form he shows towards Pip a constancy and generosity of affection, and an instinctive tenderness, which go a long way

towards mitigating his wife's severity. They are "fellow-sufferers" under her regime, and Pip can look upon Joe as a companion and equal, "a larger species of child" (ii, 6,7).

Joe presents Pip with a continual problem throughout the novel. He is the last in a long line of simple characters who offer emotional refuge to the orphans of the Dickensian universe; characters like Captain Cuttle and Peggotty, whose relative inarticulacy is a function of their capacity for unqualified and uncalculating love. Although childless themselves, they are the only true parents in the novels, and their devotion to their foster-children is absolute and undiminished. They are emblems of constancy in a changing world, a world which lives otherwise by laws of calculation and reward and punishment, and which they make whole by the example of their inexplicable and healing loyalty. Joe Gargery is the finest expression of this central Dickensian idea; he grows in stature from his original conception as a "good-natured foolish man" to the "'gentle Christian man'" (lvii, 439) whom Pip blesses in his illness, recognising in him a natural morality of the heart which his career of great expectations has, in a sense, betrayed. Yet--and this represents an interesting development in Dickens' treatment of this kind of character--it is in the nature of Pip's effort to cultivate himself that it <u>should</u> involve a betrayal of Joe, that the social pressures to which he is subject are ultimately incommunicable to the human being he needs most. Although Joe can forgive Pip, he cannot redeem his guilty conscience because he cannot understand the complexity of

motivation behind his behaviour.[1]

This moral dilemma is illustrated at the outset of the novel. When Pip steals the food and file he does so under a compulsion which deprives him of the possibility of individual moral choice; he is compelled by one authority-figure, Magwitch, to steal fromanother, Mrs. Joe. Yet this of itself does not exonerate him from the guilt attached to his action, for although he only experiences a fear of detection in relation to his sister, his theft from the forge is a violation of the intimacy he shares with Joe. Moreover, the deed has the effect of exposing a poignant inadequacy in that relationship, because Pip feels that Joe--by the very qualities which make him a sympathetic fellow-sufferer--would be incapable of understanding the compulsion behind his action:

> It was much upon my mind (particularly when I first saw him looking about for his file) that I ought to tell Joe the whole truth. Yet I did not, and for the reason that I mistrusted that if I did, he would think me worse than I was. The fear of losing Joe's confidence, and of thenceforth sitting in the chimney-corner at night staring drearily at my for ever lost companion and friend, tied up my tongue. (vi, 37)

And Pip is right in his suspicion, because when he does attempt to explain a similar situation to Joe--his lies about Miss Havisham

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1. Joe is the last of these quiet, inarticulate lives to operate credibly within the imaginative scheme of a Dickens novel, and Pip's recognition at the end of Great Expectations that he cannot reinhabit the world of the forge may be seen as Dickens' own realisation that the life of simple goodness can no longer offer redemption to those, like Pip, who have been tainted by exposure to the corruptions of a larger society. Boffin in Our Mutual Friend is a similar figure, but he can only be morally efficacious within "Society" by means of a dissimulation which, as we shall see, is inadequate to the complexity of the situation with which he has to deal.

and Satis House--Joe is astounded, and can only respond with a conventional platitude: "'a sincere well-wisher would adwise, Pip, their being dropped into your meditations, when you go up-stairs to bed'" (ix, 66). Which, of course, merely serves to compound Pip's already developed sense of guilt.[1]

His first visit to Satis House and the subsequent interrogation he has to endure from Pumblechook and his sister is a turning-point in Pip's life. Like all the other significant events which happen to him, this encounter is thrust upon him by his elders; but the actual experience is a new and complicating one for Pip. It opens up a whole world to him, a world which simultaneously attracts and humiliates--attracts because it offers a glimpse of a hitherto undreamed-of elegance and refinement, and humiliates because, in the shape of Estella, this world impresses on him how profoundly unfit he is to occupy it. Yet there is even a certain attraction in Estella's contempt for his coarse hands and thick boots, for as Hillis Miller observes, her reaction "implies a very definite self which he fails to be, and which would transcend his first state if he could reach it."[2] Her judgment, in other words, answers to and arouses Pip's own sense of thwarted potential.

When he is asked to explain his visit, Pip's natural resistance to the coercion of his elders is compounded by the

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1. Similarly with the convict's leg-iron in Chapter xvi; Pip cannot dissolve "that spell of [his] childhood" by a frank confession to Joe: "I had a further restraining dread that he would not believe it, but would assert it with the fabulous dogs and veal-cutlets as a monstrous invention" (xvi, 114).

2. Charles Dickens, The World Of His Novels, p. 267.

awareness that what has happened at Satis House is something unique and personal, something belonging to Pip as Pip and not as the mere representative of his curious relatives. His response to their attempts to invade his privacy takes the characteristic form of a verbal defiance, the account he gives them being a sort of comic masque in which the truth is presented in extravagant symbolic terms:

> 'Now, boy! What was she a doing of, when you went in to-day?' asked Mr. Pumblechook.
> 'She was sitting,' I answered, 'in a black velvet coach.'
> Mr. Pumblechook and Mrs. Joe stared at one another--as they well might--and both repeated, 'In a black velvet coach?'
> 'Yes,' said I. 'And Miss Estella--that's her niece, I think--handed her in cake and wine at the coach-window, on a gold plate. And we all had cake and wine on gold plates. And I got up behind the coach to eat mine, because she told me to.' (ix, 62-3)

This pantomime vision nonetheless embodies the contradictory elements in Pip's confused state of mind. The fantasy reconciles his initial response to the glamour and melancholy refinement ("'black velvet coach'") of Satis House with the abiding impression of social subservience he is made to feel there: "'I got up behind the coach to eat mine, because she told me to.'" It also contains a humorous echo of his first instinctive reaction to Miss Havisham's strange command that he should 'play'--"I had a desperate idea of starting round the room in the assumed character of Mr. Pumblechook's chaise-cart" (viii,54)--an echo which is repeated later in the novel when he is given the task of wheeling Miss Havisham around her room.

The effect of this wild imagining upon his audience is not, as Pip fully expects, to bring the wrath of Mrs. Joe about his head,

but in fact to explore the limits of their own knowledge of Miss Havisham's world. They are taken in by his story because they do not know any better. But when his sister then relates the story to Joe and Joe shows himself to be equally credulous, Pip is "overtaken by penitence ...Towards Joe, and Joe only, I considered myself a young monster" (ix, 64). The realisation that Joe too can be taken in, that his horizon is as limited as that of Mrs. Joe and Pumblechook, appears a terrible betrayal of the one source of love and trust in Pip's life; it has the effect of cutting him off from the simple morality of the forge and isolating him still further in his own consciousness. Joe's homely moralisings only make matters worse, for he fails to see that the subterfuges Pip is forced to practise are the natural reaction of a sensitive child to the behaviour of a strange and demanding adult world. And so just as his sister stigmatises his curiosity as a criminal tendency, Joe in his very different way causes Pip to feel a similar guilt and self-consciousness about his efforts to make sense of his experience.

VI

We are now in a position to define the central drama of Great Expectations: it is a fable of cultural emergence, of the development of sensibility in a child who grows up into a world which is incapable of understanding or sympathising with it. And

here, too, one can begin to see the imaginative significance of the historical dimension in which Dickens has set his fable. Pip comes to awareness in what is still essentially an eighteenth century environment, and it is a world observed with literal as well as moral and symbolic fidelity: the Hulks, the gibbet, the blacksmith's forge, the red-coated soldiers, the chaotic human misery of Newgate and the "Bloody Code"--this is recognisably the "radically untamed" society of Regency England, an age which is divided from the Victorian period by "something that goes deeper than a change in shopping habits."[1] Pip's situation in this world is analogous to that of the first-generation Romantic poets in the crude society of the late eighteenth century; like them he has a "pitying young fancy" (v, 29), an imaginative capacity for sympathetic penetration into the life around him which is altogether different from the simple benevolence of Joe Gargery. His is a pioneering sensibility; he experiences what is, in effect, a new way of looking at the world. One might instance, as a parallel to Pip's obsession with crime and criminals, Wordsworth's "The Convict," where the poet's sympathy for the imprisoned man passes beyond his appearance and "the fetters that link him to death" to speculate upon the moral effects of his incarceration--"Yet my fancy has pierced to his heart, and pourtrays/ More terrible images there";[2] or Coleridge's "The Dungeon," with its insistent questioning of

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1. R.J. White, Life in Regency England (1963), pp. 4, 17.
2. Lyrical Ballads, ed. R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones (1963), pp. 109-10.

past brutality:

> And this place our forefathers made for man!
> This is the process of our love and wisdom,
> To each poor brother who offends against us ...[1]

The point to be stressed about this new spirit of social sympathy is its timing. In the early years of the nineteenth century when Pip and his creator were children, there still persisted a barbarous criminal code which had changed little in centuries. When Dickens died in 1870, as Philip Collins has pointed out, "the system for dealing with criminals was recognisably the one we have inherited; the system that obtained in his boyhood belongs to another world, at least as much akin to the sixteenth century as to the twentieth."[2]

It is this sense of belonging to "another world" that Great Expectations so powerfully conveys. Pip's consciousness is unique in the sense that the consciousness of his whole generation was unique. And Dickens, it need scarcely be said, belongs to this generation also; he too was born at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and his sensibility (as Gissing noted) was deeply conditioned by the "life of the young century--cruel, unlovely, but abounding in vital force."[3] His life-span corresponds to that of Dr. Kitson Clark's hypothetical Victorian who, over thirty years of age in 1850, "had lived in a world in which there were not only no railways, but also no police to speak of. When he was born, the

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1. Lyrical Ballads, p. 81.
2. Dickens and Crime, p. 3.
3. Charles Dickens: A Critical Study, p. 15.

old terrible criminal code would still be in force, the pillory still used and the cruel sports still legal."[1] At this distance of time it is almost impossible to appreciate the contrast which this world presented to the mid-Victorian period. Walter Besant, writing in 1887 about the year of Queen Victoria's accession, spoke of "a time so utterly passed away and vanished that a young man can hardly understand it."[2] A modern scholar has seen in the coming of the railways a line of division in English life even more radical than that made by the First World War: "The sense of division, of belonging to two ages ...can never have been so strong as for those authors who grew up into the railway age."[3]

There must have been many contemporary readers of Great Expectations for whom this sense of division was a felt reality, who shared the social and historical perspective which Dickens was exploiting. K.J. Fielding has cited the case of Sir Henry Hawkins, Baron Brampton (1817-1907), the famous advocate whose most abiding childhood recollection was the sight of the corpse of a seventeen-year-old youth, executed at Bedford Jail for rick-

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1. The Making of Victorian England, p. 60.

2. Fifty Years Ago (1888), p. 1. Bagehot, too, in his 1858 essay on Dickens, spoke in similar terms of the early years of the century: "The world of the 'Six Acts,' of the frequent executions for death, of the Draconic criminal law, is so far removed from us that we cannot comprehend its having ever existed" ("Charles Dickens," Literary Studies [Everyman Ed., 2 vols., 1911], II, 190).

3. Kathleen Tillotson, Novels of the Eighteen-Forties, pp. 106-07. The whole of this section in Mrs. Tillotson's book is fascinating and relevant. She goes on to observe of the writers of Dickens' generation: "Cut off abruptly from the stagecoach world in their youth, they prolonged and idealized in memory. By constantly recreating it, they made good their age's seeming betrayal" (p. 107).

burning, being carried past his schoolroom window by the youth's parents. In his early years on the Home Circuit Hawkins recalls that "they punished severely even trivial offences ...while a sentence of seven years' transportation was almost as good as an acquittal;" that at every assize the law was "like a tiger let loose upon the district," its victims being not so much the "hardened ruffians" as "ignorant rural labourers." This was a time when the Old Bailey was "the very cesspool for the offscourings of humanity," where even in 1852 Newgate had a room in which were stored the busts of hanged convicts, after the manner of Jaggers' office, with the indentation of the rope on the neck and "the mark of the knot under the ear"--horrors which impressed Hawkins with "a disgust of the brutal tendency of the age."[1]

The experience of men like Hawkins helps us to see how much Pip's "awakened conscience" (iii, 14), his extreme sensitivity to an encompassing "taint of prison and crime" (xxxii, 249), is to be attributed to his historical situation. His tender conscience seems idiosyncratic to him precisely because it is a unique phenomenon, unsanctioned by the collective experience of his milieu. Pip is separated from the forge by the growth of all that is individual in his nature: his intelligence, curiosity, quick sympathy, "pitying young fancy"--qualities which are frustrated not simply by the negative forces in his environment, as these reveal themselves in his sister and Pumblechook, but by what is

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1. Reminiscences of Sir Henry Hawkins, ed. Richard Harris, K.C. (1904), pp. 15-16, 37, 87, 38, 121; see also Fielding, "Critical Autonomy of Great Expectations," pp. 86-7.

best in it too, by Joe Gargery himself, whose simple code cannot accommodate these struggles within Pip's nature. His coming to self-awareness is at once an inevitable process (it has its origin, as we have seen, in his essentially defensive efforts to comprehend the demands of the adult world) and a constant source of painful remorse, because it cuts him off from the security of Joe's love and from any recourse to the homely values which Joe represents. This moral deadlock issues in the tone of ironic resignation which is the controlling mood of the novel:

> How much of my ungracious condition of mind may have been my own fault, how much Miss Havisham's, how much my sister's, is now of no moment to me or to any one. The change was made in me; the thing was done. Well or ill done, excusably or inexcusably, it was done. (xiv, 100)

There is, then, a peculiarly intimate relationship between Pip's attempt to civilise himself and his pervading sense of guilt. He feels that the development of his sensibility has placed him outside the reach of received morality, and since it was his initial act of sympathy for the convict that led to the breach in his intimacy with Joe, his "pitying young fancy" begins to appear to Pip as itself an anti-social phenomenon. For although the convict represents everything from which Pip hopes to escape--brutal intimidation, moral coercion, coarse physical contact between individuals--at the same time he offers the only model available to Pip in his close-knit rural community for the loneliness and alienation which his career of self-improvement increasingly involves: that of the social outcast. In its isolation from both the reassuring pieties of his simple home and the security

which a born gentleman like Herbert knows, Pip's effort at self-culture seems to him essentially analogous to the social guilt of the criminal.

The historical setting of the novel provides the important clue to the nature of Pip's much-discussed guilt. His predicament is representative of a social class in the act of emergence; specifically, of the Victorian middle class in its emergence from savage origins. He needs civilisation because he is so acutely aware (as Herbert cannot be) of its opposite; and consequently he overvalues it, purging his advance into gentility from all associations with the physical brutality which had formed his "first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things." Satis House comes to symbolise "everything that was picturesque" (xv, 103), and it is precious to Pip just because it seems to be the negation of all that he has known on the marshes. Estella is so utterly divorced in his mind from any association with criminality that he cannot bear Jaggers even to sit next her at the card-table, trumping "the glory of our Kings and Queens ... with mean little cards at the ends of hands" (xxix, 229). While waiting for her at the coach-house near Newgate he feels deeply contaminated by his recent exposure to Wemmick's Conservatory:

> ...I thought of the beautiful young Estella, proud and refined, coming towards me, and I thought with absolute abhorrence of the contrast between the jail and her. I wished that Wemmick had not met me, or that I had not yielded to him and gone with him, so that, of all days in the year on this day, I might not have had Newgate in my breath and on my clothes. (xxxii, 249-50)

Yet the very intensity with which Pip repudiates this contrast betrays a nagging consciousness of interrelationship between the areas of his experience which he wants to keep apart. He is, in a real sense, the conscience of his environment, for he has to carry within himself a secret knowledge of the polarities which make up his world. The blacksmith's boy who aspires to being a gentleman can never know the certainty of status which Herbert inherits as a matter of course; at home in neither world, he experiences a continual remorse and a moral isolation which align him, paradoxically, with the criminal outcast who constitutes his most enduring image of all that the civilised life will free him from. Pip's sense of guilt, I would suggest, is the subconscious recognition of a truth which he deeply resents, in common with the Victorian middle class culture of which he may be said to be a pioneer: that criminality and civilisation, violence and refinement, Magwitch and Estella, are not warring opposites but intimately and inextricably bound together.

The basic donnée of the book, the pivot on which Dickens' "grotesque tragi-comic conception" turns, is the fact that Magwitch is Pip's benefactor and the father of Estella. But so firm is Dickens' control on his theme, so subtle his command of significant detail, that long before the convict's return he has been able to suggest this inherent contradiction in his hero's expectations. The narrative is indeed a fabric of almost incredible richness and resonance. For example, when Pip visits Satis House for the second time the smoke from the dining-room fire reminds him of "our own

marsh mist" (xi, 78), just as the cobwebs on Miss Havisham's bridal cake recall the damp on the hedges, like "a coarser sort of spiders' webs" (iii, 14), on the morning when he sneaks out of the forge to carry the food to Magwitch. Such delicate tracery of interrelationship serves to unify the atmosphere of the novel, undermining the opposition Pip is setting up between the savagery of the marshes and the refinement of Satis House, and thereby preparing the way for the revelations to come.

"Spider" is the name given to Bentley Drummle by Jaggers, and here again Dickens foreshadows an important truth which is only fully manifest at the end of Great Expectations. As his name implies, with its elision of "drum" and "pummel," Drummle is heavy, brutish, cruel, and violent; he is an upper-class equivalent of the journeyman Orlick, with whom he is associated at the end of chapter xliii. The function of this character in the scheme of the novel is to remind us that violence and brutality are not confined to the world of the marshes, that they also exist in the supposedly refined and aristocratic society of London. And Estella's marriage to Drummle provides another dimension to our understanding of her character. This "proud and refined" girl who is the very incarnation of the civilised life to which Pip aspires, can prefer a coarse brute like Drummle because there exists, deep within her, a violent animal nature which Pip ignores. Dickens suggests this fact in Chapter xi, where Pip fights and beats Herbert. Unknown to him, Estella has been watching the fight and when she comes down to let him out "there was a bright flush upon

her face, as though something had happened to delight her." She offers to let Pip kiss her, and he does so, without realising the significance of her sudden response; he feels that "the kiss was given to the coarse common boy as a piece of money might have been, and that it was worth nothing" (xi, 86). The scene enacts the supreme paradox of Pip's career: Estella can only respond to him when he exhibits those qualities of physical force and coarse, animal aggression which, in order to win her, he is at pains to civilise out of himself.

VII

Throughout this chapter I have stressed a quality of violence as the distinguishing feature of the imaginative world created in Great Expectations. We have seen that in this Dickens has been faithful to the period in which his novel is set, but also that through Pip's reaction he is dramatising an attitude which we can recognise as belonging to a later time, to the mid-Victorian era in which the book was written. It is Pip's self-conscious revulsion from the violence of his culture which sets him apart from his home and determines the character of his expectations; and it is this violence, in the shape of Magwitch, which provides the ultimate touchstone for the values and social position he has embraced. The most intimate meaning of Dickens' fable of social evolution is finally revealed when the old convict returns, and

brings with him not only the truth about the source of Pip's wealth, but also a fearful reassertion of the primitive forces from which he had thought to have escaped forever:

> The influences of his solitary hut-life were upon him besides, and gave him a savage air that no dress could tame; added to these were the influences of his subsequent branded life among men, and crowning all, his consciousness that he was dodging and hiding now. In all his ways of sitting and standing, and eating and drinking--of brooding about, in a high-shouldered reluctant style--of taking out his great horn-handled jack-knife and wiping it on his legs and cutting his food--of lifting light glasses and cups to his lips, as if they were clumsy pannikins--of chopping a wedge off his bread, and soaking up with it the last fragments of gravy round and round his plate, as if to make the most of an allowance, and then drying his fingers on it, and then swallowing it ...there was Prisoner, Felon, Bondsman, plain as plain could be....
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> Words cannot tell what a sense I had, at the same time, of the dreadful mystery that he was to me. When he fell asleep of an evening, with his knotted hands clenching the sides of the easy-chair, and his bald head tattooed with deep wrinkles falling forward on his breast, I would sit and look at him, wondering what he had done, and loading him with all the crimes in the Calendar, until the impulse was powerful on me to start up and fly from him. (xl, 319)

Magwitch is the embodiment of everything Pip has tried to free himself from, even down to the "heavy grubbing" which is only an exaggerated form of the clumsy table-manners Pip had acquired at the forge. He is also a violent criminal, and for all Pip knows, a man with blood on his hands; he recalls with horror his childhood vision of the convict as a "desperately violent man" whom he had seen "down in the ditch, tearing and fighting like a wild beast" (xxxix, 308). Yet such is the symbolic suggestiveness of Dickens' conception, that this wild beast, a returned transport, is in his way a nightmare version of the Victorian self-made man.[1]

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1. Even here one can see something of Dickens' literal and imaginative fidelity to the period setting of his novel. It was a fact that in the early years of the colonisation of Australia many

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He has pursued wealth with a single-mindedness which makes his career in Australia a bizarre parody of the classic economic success story: "'I lived rough,'" he tells Pip, echoing the paternal hopes of first-generation wealth, "'that you should live smooth; I worked hard that you should be above work'" (xxxix, 304).

What is the significance of Magwitch in the novel? Some critics have seen in him a figure of capitalist exploitation, and this may be part of Dickens' meaning. But if it were all he had in mind in the creation of this character he would surely have made him more respectable and less obviously a social outsider: when he wanted a typical working man Dickens tended to think in terms of Will Fern and Stephen Blackpool. Magwitch stands for something more complex and interesting than an exploited proletariat. He is the father of Estella, the "proud and refined" girl who is the very emblem and model of the civilised life to which Pip aspires; and theirs is a blood relationship in a double sense, for we have already seen that Estella possesses an animal will and energy and passion, a deeply-seated physical nature which Pip ignores in his idealisation of her. The moral pattern of Great Expectations is only fulfilled when, in chapter xlviii, Jaggers hints that Bentley Drummle will beat Estella and Pip, glancing at

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emancipated convicts did make huge fortunes. Giving evidence before the 1837 Select Committee on Transportation, John Lang, a Church of Scotland clergyman in New South Wales, cited the case of one convict who was reputed to have an annual income of £40,000, and agreed that there were many who had "some thousands a year." They made their fortunes "generally very rapidly," Lang said, because they "bent the whole energy of mind and body to money making" (Parliamentary Reports, XIX [1837],254-56).

Molly's knitting fingers and flowing hair, realises that this woman is the mother of the girl he loves. The wheel has come full circle; the girl who had been the inspiration for his attempt to improve himself, is found in the end to be the daughter of a transported convict and a "'wild beast tamed'" (xxiv, 190), someone so violent and powerful that she has been able to strangle another woman with her bare hands. And what in a lesser novelist would be a melodramatic linkage is here a symbolic structure of deep imaginative power and social implication. This triangular relationship of "blood" ramifies throughout the novel, destroying the opposition Pip has set up between the worlds of the marshes, Satis House, and London.

Magwitch is the ultimate source of all Pip's expectations. With his energy, his resourcefulness, his powerful will and rough sense of justice, his touching respect for the refinements of life expressed in admiration for his "dear boy's" dubious accomplishments, he stands in much the same relationship to Pip as the economic pioneers of the early nineteenth century--the industrialists and engineers celebrated by Smiles--did to the genteel mid-Victorian society whose prosperity their energies largely made possible. Dickens is saying here that Pip's gentility is made possible by Magwitch; literally, by the old convict's money, but also metaphorically by the qualities of will, energy, and violence which he brings to the accumulation of his money, qualities which Dickens suggests are in their extreme form essentially akin to the anarchic energies of the violent criminal.

The significance of the historical dimension in this novel becomes clear when we realise that the mid-Victorian gentility which Pip enjoys is seen as brought into being by the very barbarism and brutality characteristic of the old world he seeks to repudiate. The economic security which enables him to work out the beast is itself provided by bestial means.

The disturbing ambiguity of this startling vision makes Great Expectations a perfect fable of the Victorian uneasiness. Reading the Victorians on their own achievements one learns to catch a characteristic note of uncertainty: at one moment they are congratulating themselves on the improvement of life and refinement of manners they have brought about, and despising their ancestors for their backwardness and ignorance; and at another they are expressing their profound uneasiness about the premisses on which this new civilisation is based, their distrusts of the instruments by which it has been achieved, their sense of loss and betrayal at the passing of the more traditional society they have superseded. And behind this paradoxical mood, so typically Victorian, there is perhaps a consciousness of middle class guilt, a disturbed awareness that although society has changed, the forms of social oppression have not:

> Can we speak of our era of civilization in any other way than as the savage era; does it not bear the same relation to our future progress that the age of Charlemagne and William the Conqueror bore to feudalism....The steel barons have given place to the gold barons, and many of them have been as ruthless and cruel as their predecessors--as reckless of life in seeking to attain their ends--as selfish in many instances as the baron of the middle age battle-

> field....All will confess that the competiting, the underselling, the jostling, elbowing state of society, seems very unlike an ideal state.[1]

In the story of Pip Dickens has dramatised the growing-pains of this middle class culture as it sought to civilise itself. At the end of the novel he is left with his decency, his tact, his gentlemanly manners and cultivated tastes--all the qualities, in fact, to which he has aspired throughout the novel. He even inherits (in the second ending) a softened Estella, humanised by the physical humiliation of her marriage. Yet we feel that there is something missing in Pip, that the sober middle-aged business man who appears at the end is somehow a shadowy outcome of the small boy on the marshes at the beginning. Robert Garis has attributed this lack to the fact that Pip's society does not permit any "free expression of libido";[2] I would suggest just the contrary, that Pip is inhibited because he knows only too well what the free expression of libido involves, and because the knowledge deprives

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1. E.P. Hood, The Age and Its Architects, 1850, p. 283.

2. The Dickens Theatre, p. 218. The interpretation for which I have argued would also explain the rôle which Orlick plays in the novel. Garis points out (rightly, and as Moynahan also indicates in his article) that most of Orlick's actions are curiously arbitrary, and that he does not seem to have any "organic relationship to the plot of Great Expectations"; he is there, Garis suggests, "because the fable demands that the free expression of libido should be impossible and virtually inconceivable in the civilisation Dickens is describing" (p. 218). The violence and anarchy which Orlick symbolises were necessary to the fable, because Dickens "needed to show the impossibility of any legitimate expression of libido in this civilisation" (p. 220). Once again, I would advance a contrary interpretation: that Orlick represents, in an extreme form, the brutality and physical force inherent in Pip's early environment; and that his presence in the novel reinforces our sense of this. Like the [Contd.

him of his earlier faith in the possibilities of civilisation.

Turning for a moment to another art-form, architecture, one can appreciate the widespread relevance of the hiatus of the will which Pip experiences. It is now generally agreed that the finest and most characteristic architectural achievements of the Victorian age were its engineering achievements--the bridges of Telford and Brunel, the Crystal Palace, the great Railway Stations. Yet the Victorians themselves, so a recent historian has argued, failed to see these achievements for what they were, an aesthetic expression of the predominantly industrial character of their civilisation:

> The age was fascinated by its own mines, pumps, bridges and tunnels. It had no doubts about either their magic or their novelty, but it also felt some curious moral duty to regard them only as a source of useful wealth whereby something quite different could be encouraged--the 'Fine Arts', meaning sometimes the worst sculpture, painting and architecture ever known.[1]

This incapacity to give imaginative credence to the technological vitality of the age is a further reflection of the Victorians' distrust of the powerful forces which had shaped, and were shaping their society. It is strange that this massive social upheaval should have brought into prominence a middle class many of whose essential features are mirrored in the adult Pip: respectable, self-controlled, decorous, but basically timid and deeply ambivalent about the fierce energies which lie beneath the surface of civilised life.

Contd.]
convict whom Pip remembers "down in the ditch, tearing and fighting like a wild beast," he is a symbol of everything that Pip hopes to escape from in his career of great expectations.

1. Robert Furneaux Jordan, Victorian Architecture (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1966), p. 119.

Dickens could write Great Expectations because he was himself so deeply involved in the process of social emergence it describes; he could conceive of Magwitch with such fascinated horror because he could also write, in an article on the street ruffian, "I would have his back scarified often and deep."[1] And if the story of Pip is representative of an important area of nineteenth century experience, then we can see how uniquely qualified Dickens was to write it. The fable of a poor boy's rise into uneasy gentility caught up the ambiguities in his own most intimate experience. Like Pip, Dickens had been inspired by great expectations, by those "early hopes of growing up to be a learned and distinguished man";[2] like Pip too, he had felt his hopes "crushed in [his] breast" by the insecurity and degradation of his early years in London. What was made possible for Pip by Magwitch's gift, Dickens had to achieve through the practise of his art; and we have seen how much of that art grew out of his dialogue with the past--how he was drawn back by a strange "attraction of repulsion" to the underworld which was also his past and, in a sense, his Magwitch, the source of inspiration for the books whose success enabled him to escape from it. A consciousness of the social polarities within Victorian England was the very nerve of Dickens' genius, and much of his greatest work was written out of his ambiguous response to the underworld. But only in Great

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1. "The Ruffian," A.Y.R., XX, 10 October 1868, 421; U.T., p. 302.
2. Forster, p. 26.

Expectations did he find a form which allowed him to express this ambiguity in its full complexity, and in expressing it, to recognise and redeem the past.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION: OUR MUTUAL FRIEND

I

In its perfect blend of social and autobiographical meaning with artistic form, Great Expectations has some claim to be considered Dickens' masterpiece. The writing of it seems to have come easily to him, and there is a quality of universality in Pip's story which suggests Dickens' complete mastery of the representative personal experience out of which it was conceived. It is the most consistently retrospective of his novels, and the consummation of the autobiographical movement in his work begun in The Haunted Man and David Copperfield. We have seen in Bleak House and Little Dorrit how Dickens tended to set his contemporary satire back into an earlier period, relating past to present in the effort to comprehend the sufferings of his childhood, and Great Expectations is also the culminating work in this process--a commentary on the uneasy prosperity of the mid-century through an historical recreation of the primitive origins out of which the Victorian middle class had evolved.

With his next novel, Our Mutual Friend (1864-65), Dickens returns to the present:

> In these times of ours, though concerning the exact year there is no need to be precise ...(I, i, 1)

The opening words do not specify a date, but it is clear that Dickens means us to see Our Mutual Friend, like Hard Times, as a novel "for These Times": its mood and setting belong unmistakably to the eighteen-sixties. It is characteristic of the interaction

between past and present which I have traced in Dickens' later novels that, after Great Expectations, he should turn again to the contemporary scene, and from this point of view Our Mutual Friend can be seen as a return to the methods of Hard Times: both are "topical" works, directed to a particular state of society at a particular time, and in neither do we feel the pull of the past which is so marked in David Copperfield, Bleak House, Little Dorrit, and Great Expectations. Indeed, Dickens seems to have consciously rejected the retrospective mode in Our Mutual Friend, perhaps because, as K.J. Fielding suggests, the very intensity with which he had used his past in previous novels "changed his own response. We may reasonably be reminded of how, having dreamed for years of his own dead sister-in-law, Mary Hogarth, he had only to tell his wife about it for the dreams to stop."[1]

Dickens had finally worked out the rich vein of memory which had primed his imagination for so long. In Our Mutual Friend he turns his back on the past and attempts another nineteen-number anatomy of society much after the manner of Bleak House and Little Dorrit. But the contemporary scene has changed; Dickens himself has changed; and there is a new and uncharacteristic lack of certainty in his response. Our Mutual Friend is a strange novel, and one sign of this is the extent to which it has divided critical opinion, both in Dickens' day and in our own. Henry James thought it had been "dug out as with a spade and pickaxe";[2] E.S. Dallas,

1. "Dickens and the Past: The Novelist of Memory," Experience in the Novel, p. 130.
2. "Our Mutual Friend," The Nation, I (1865), 786.

in a review which Dickens read and was evidently pleased by, criticised the "'Social Chorus'" as "having no real connexion with the tale in which we are interested," but praised the naturalness of the characters in the "main story";[1] Chesterton described it as "a sort of Indian summer of his farce"--a surprising judgment even by his standards.[2] More recently, Jack Lindsay and Edgar Johnson have reversed Dallas' estimate by extolling the Shakespearian depth and richness of Dickens' social vision, while K.J. Fielding has voiced the reservations of many readers by finding Our Mutual Friend an ambitious failure, in which Dickens was "pushing his aims beyond his means."[3]

These differing views point to the fact that Our Mutual Friend stimulates an unusual diversity of response in its readers: no single statement can sum up Dickens' intention here, and this seems to be so partly because the novel is, of its very nature, something of a mystery. It is a story of deception and disguise, which deals in a variety of ways with the themes of personal uncertainty and social confusion--Eugene Wrayburn's indecisive pursuit of Lizzie Hexam, the multiple disguises assumed by John Harmon, Boffin's impersonation, the treachery of the Lammles, Fledgeby's use of Riah as a front for his money-lending business, the conflict between passion and respectability in Bradley Headstone, and so on. A

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1. "Our Mutual Friend," Times, 29 November 1865, p. 6.
2. Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens (1911), p. 207.
3. Charles Dickens: A Critical Introduction, p. 234.

large number of the characters in the novel are not what they seem to be on the surface, and much of the energy of Dickens' imagination goes to showing us that this is so. Moreover, his own response to some of these characters and issues is itself ambiguous. We can see this by comparing the treatment of money in Great Expectations and Our Mutual Friend. Dickens has been criticised for showing Pip at the end of the novel as a comfortable Victorian businessman: "We were not in a grand way of business, but we had a good name, and worked for our profits, and did very well" (lviii, 455-56). Yet the emphasis here is surely right: it falls not on the profits but on the fact that Pip worked for them, a statement that acquires a certain moral force when we recall his earlier attitude to unearned wealth. The vision of money's corrupting power in Our Mutual Friend would seem to be much more severe, with the symbolism of the dust-mounds and the fierce attack on "Shares," yet we are asked at the end of the novel to accept the fact that John and Bella settled down happily on old Harmon's fortune, and that, in Boffin's words, "'his money had turned bright again, after a long, long rust in the dark ...'" (IV, xiii, 778). There is a contradiction between Dickens' affirmation of money here and the pessimistic implications of his satire elsewhere in the novel, and it reveals an uncertainty in his handling of the theme.

This uncertainty and moral ambiguity is, I would suggest, something new in Dickens' work. In the previous novels ambiguity is present as a subversive force, an offshoot of a vision of life which is relatively clear and unequivocal in its conscious moral

formulations. Thus I have argued that David Copperfield is a complex novel because its subversive meanings coexist, as it were unconsciously, with Dickens' more straightforward construction of what is taking place in the book. Even Great Expectations, which might seem an exception, combines a sophistication and complexity of embodied meaning with the convincing expression of certain traditional moral positives, such as charity and fellow-feeling. But the moral positives of Our Mutual Friend are more difficult to locate; many of the characters are conceived or presented in an ambiguous way, and there is a conscious interest in the discrepancy between seeming and being. We can perhaps see in this a reflection of the moral ambiguity in Dickens' attitude to himself at the time of writing Our Mutual Friend, which in turn may explain some of the peculiarities of the novel.

Before 1858, as we have seen, there is a close relationship between Dickens' life and his fiction. He incorporated elements of his personal experience into his novels, and no doubt felt able to do so because the life he was then leading was in the main compatible with the view of himself which he wished his public to have, and which that public was willing to accept in a popular novelist. The same can hardly be said of the final decade of his life. He became much more circumspect about his private life, and after Great Expectations, more self-conscious about the use of fiction for self-exploration. His life at this time is something that cannot be examined in detail here, but however great our

respect for a conservative reluctance to accept many of the wilder assumptions about Dickens' last ten years, it is clear that there had been a sharp break with his life up to 1858. The novelist of domestic harmony had broken up the family circle; he left old friends like Mark Lemon and Miss Burdett Coutts for such nonentities as Edmund Yates and Percy Fitzgerald; his marriage gave way to a relationship of some kind with Ellen Ternan; he moved his home from Tavistock House to Gad's Hill, and made secret expeditions to Peckham, Slough, and hideaways in France.[1] Even his career as a writer was partly sacrificed to his performances as a public reader. No one has yet understood Dickens well enough to offer a full explanation for all this, but what does concern us here is that Dickens' life took a new direction after 1858. And in so far as there is a strong autobiographical element in many of the novels, and that Dickens used fiction as a means of self-exploration, it may be that we can only understand Our Mutual Friend if we take these extraordinary changes in his life into account.

For it is clear that at this stage of his career Dickens could not write about himself with anything like the old directness, and this is reflected, I think, in a sense of strain evident in his style, and in the curious mixture of conventional and experimental elements in the novel. We notice that there are aspects of Victorian respectability which he not only finds funny but positively hates, and at the same time that he has become interested in a more

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1. For an interesting example of Dickens' secrecy at this period of his life, see W.J. Carlton, "Dickens's Forgotten Retreat in France," Dickensian, LXII (1966), 69-86.

morally ambiguous type of character and in the discrepancy between public appearance and inner reality. He has begun to see London itself as a bad joke; it is the setting for a vision of life which begins with a man who makes his living fishing corpses from the Thames, which has a dirty and eccentric taxidermist called Venus in love with a squalid girl named "Pleasant," which shows contempt for the ragged schools and the trained schoolmaster as well as for the conventional middle class, and which centres on the notorious dust-mounds under the guardianship of an amiable comic dustman. The grave opens in the "road of life" in Our Mutual Friend even more suddenly than it did in front of Pip on the way home to his sister's funeral (G.E., xxxv, 264), and the gap it makes is even wider.

These developments suggest that Dickens was changing as he grew older, and that the divisions between his private life and public activities had become too extreme for him to express it directly in his fiction. The confusion and despair and moral uncertainty in Our Mutual Friend are also present in Dickens' response to the world he is describing: it is a disturbing novel, one might say, because Dickens himself is disturbed. In this chapter I want to examine the relationship between the strengths and (as it seems to me) the weaknesses of Dickens' last completed novel, and to suggest ways in which these may be understood in terms of his changing attitudes to himself and his art in the final decade of his life.

II

Perhaps the most striking feature of Our Mutual Friend is the style in which it is written. There can be no transition in all Dickens more abrupt than that from the "secret prose" of Great Expectations, as Graham Greene has called it, "that sense of a mind speaking to itself with no one there to listen,"[1] to the tense, highly-wrought language of Our Mutual Friend. Here is a characteristic passage from the "Society" chapters:

> The mature young lady is a lady of property. The mature young gentleman is a gentleman of property. He invests his property. He goes, in a condescending amateurish way, into the City, attends meetings of Directors, and has to do with traffic in Shares. As is well known to the wise in their generation, traffic in Shares is the one thing to have to do with in this world. Have no antecedents, no established character, no cultivation, no ideas, no manners; have Shares. Have Shares enough to be on Boards of Direction in capital letters, oscillate on mysterious business between London and Paris, and be great. Where does he come from? Shares. Where is he going to? Shares. What are his tastes? Shares. Has he any principles? Shares. What squeezes him into Parliament? Shares. Perhaps he never of himself achieved success in anything, never originated anything, never produced anything! Sufficient answer to all; Shares. O mighty Shares!... (I, x, 114)

Dickens' prose here is not distinguished by any powers of description or analysis but rather by a certain fierce note of denunciation which recalls the polemical mood of Hard Times. There is also a suggestion of Carlyle's influence, although closer inspection reveals a discipline of style, a quality of dramatic organisation within the paragraph, that we do not associate with Carlyle. The passage begins calmly enough in the mood of restrained

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1. "The Young Dickens," Collected Essays, p. 104.

irony which is the stylistic norm of the "Society" chapters, but with the biblical echo "wise in their generation" the pressure of indignant feeling which has been building up behind the short, controlled sentences breaks through the surface, and invective takes over from irony: "Where does he come from? Shares. Where is he going to? Shares...." The repetition of the word "Shares"--eleven times in as many lines--brings home Dickens' point: they stand in the way of life, a corrosive influence undermining the moral basis of human conduct.

The art of this passage is a highly dramatic but simplified art, akin to the bold symbolic conception of the dust-mounds and the striking orchestration of the opening scenes, when Gaffer Hexam's scavenging on the Thames is juxtaposed with the Veneerings' dinner-party. In this satire on "'money, money, money, and what money can make of life'" (III, iv, 460), we find nothing so delicately managed as (for example) the moment of Magwitch's return in Great Expectations, when Pip attempts to repay him the "two fat sweltering one-pound notes" (x, 73) which had been the old convict's first gift of gratitude:

> 'I was a poor boy then, as you know, and to a poor boy they were a little fortune. But, like you, I have done well since, and you must let me pay them back. You can put them to some other poor boy's use.' I took out my purse.
> He watched me as I laid my purse upon the table and opened it, and he watched me as I separated two one-pound notes from its contents. They were clean and new, and I spread them out and handed them over to him. Still watching me, he laid them one upon the other, folded them longwise, gave them a twist, set fire to them at the lamp, and dropped the ashes into the tray. (xxxix, 302-03)

With subdued emphasis, Dickens is here making a point similar to that which he may be supposed to be making at the beginning of Our Mutual Friend: there is no such thing as "clean" money, the living which Gaffer Hexam dredges from the Thames is no dirtier than the investments which pay for the Veneerings' banquet. But in Great Expectations the symbolic meaning is unforced, it adheres in the telling particularity of Magwitch's action; in Our Mutual Friend symbolism predominates over detail, and Dickens' response (as in the "Shares" passage) is much more rhetorical.

This movement towards a more systematic symbolism does not, I think, make for greater clarity than in Great Expectations, but it indicates an increased self-consciousness in his treatment of the money theme. The fortune-hunters and nouveaux riches of the share-pushing 'sixties represent a new area of social comment for Dickens; he was moving into Thackeray's country or, more accurately, into the later Victorian world of Trollope's The Way We Live Now and James' novels. There is a certain fitness in the fact that the young Henry James should have reviewed Our Mutual Friend,[1] and although his comments are rather unsympathetic (he found it lacking in humanity) the world of the novel is in some respects closer to The Wings of the Dove than to Dombey and Son. The new rentier class is well observed: "Between the room and the men there were strong points of general resemblance," Dickens writes of Lammle's room, "Both were too gaudy, too slangy, too odorous of cigars, and too much given to horseflesh; the latter characteristic being exemplified in the room by its decorations, and in the men by their

1. In The Nation, I (1865), 786-87.

conversation" (II, iv, 261). The distaste with which Dickens views the vulgarity of men like Lammle and Fledgeby is matched by the severity of his satire on the Victorian hypocrite, who has changed from Pecksniff and Murdstone into Podsnap. "It comes to us as a disturbing realization," Edmund Wilson acutely remarks, "that Dickens is now afraid of Podsnap,"[1] and certainly the very stringency of his satire betrays a deep loathing of the man and what he stands for:

> Mr. Podsnap's world was not a very large world, morally; no, nor even geographically: seeing that although his business was sustained upon commerce with other countries, he considered other countries, with that important reservation, a mistake, and of their manners and customs would conclusively observe, 'Not English!' when, PRESTO! with a flourish of the arm, and a flush of the face, they were swept away. Elsewise, the world got up at eight, shaved close at a quarter-past, breakfasted at nine, went to the City at ten, came home at half-past five, and dined at seven. Mr. Podsnap's notions of the Arts in their integrity might have been stated thus. Literature; large print, respectively descriptive of getting up at eight, shaving close at a quarter-past, breakfasting at nine, going to the City at ten, coming home at half-past five, and dining at seven. Painting and Sculpture; models and portraits representing Professors of getting up at eight, shaving close at a quarter-past, breakfasting at nine, going to the City at ten ...Nothing else to be permitted to those same vagrants the Arts, on pain of excommunication. Nothing else To Be--anywhere! (I, xi, 128-29)

In a sense, the brilliance of this satirical portrait depends upon its very unfairness: Dickens is turning Podsnap's own dogmatism against the man himself. He comes before us enslaved in the rigidity of his personal habits, and through the device of repetition Dickens shows this rigidity extending to colour the man's whole view of existence. The style enacts this process of deadening, until Podsnap ceases to be a human being and becomes a mere moral

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1. The Wound and the Bow, p. 70.

automaton, a clockwork man endlessly referring the variety of life to the narrow standard of his own monotonous routine.

One notes here, as in the "Shares" passage discussed above, a reliance on the effects of repetition which gives a generalising finality to Dickens' satire. The description of Podsnap is also a judgment, and there are no redeeming details in the portrait which could allow us to think we can see Podsnap independently of the way Dickens shows him to us. This quality of generalisation is of course nothing new in Dickens' satire--it is there in Bleak House, Hard Times, and in the descriptions of the Circumlocution Office and Merdle's dinner parties in Little Dorrit--but the device is much more marked and prevalent in Our Mutual Friend. Henry James noted the self-conscious rhetoric of the book: "Seldom, we reflected, had we read a book so intensely written, so little seen, known, or felt"; and more recently Sylvere Monod has observed that "le procédé de répétition va jouer un role de premier plan dans Our Mutual Friend encore, comme dans les oeuvres antérieures de Dickens."[1] Monod attributes this to the experience of the public Readings, and certainly many of these passages are very effective when read aloud. He goes on to suggest that Dickens employs "un style artificiel" in this novel to register the artificiality and unreality of society itself. It is an interesting theory, and applicable to the Veneerings and their immediate circle, those faceless men Boots and Brewer: their insubstantiality is wonderfully rendered by a succession of adjectives which stop just short of

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1. The Nation, I, 786; "L'expression dans Our Mutual Friend: Manière ou maniérisme?," Etudes Anglaises, X (1957), 38.

suggesting a human reality--"The great looking-glass above the sideboard reflects the table and the company....Reflects Veneering; forty, wavy-haired, dark, tending to corpulence, sly, mysterious, filmy--a kind of sufficiently well-looking veiled-prophet, not prophesying. Reflects Mrs. Veneering; fair, aquiline-nosed and fingered, not so much light hair as she might have, gorgeous in raiment and jewels, enthusiastic, propitiatory, conscious that a corner of her husband's veil is over herself...." (I, ii, 10)

And yet there is a sense in which the air of unreality in these chapters extends beyond Dickens' immediate satiric intention. The Veneerings may be all surface, but poor Twemlow is also dehumanised by Dickens' rhetoric: he is an "article," an "innocent piece of dinner-furniture that went upon easy castors and was kept over a livery stable-yard in Duke Street, Saint James's" (I, ii, 6); only gradually does he emerge from his definition as an object to become a human being. Elsewhere, we find characters imprisoned in the metaphors used to describe them: the Veneerings' butler is likened to "a gloomy Analytical Chemist" (I, ii, 10), and thereafter is, simply, "the Analytical Chemist"; the Podsnap guests who do not qualify for dinner but are invited to the soirée "had a claim to be invited to come and take a haunch of mutton vapour-bath at half-past nine" (I, xi, 130), and subsequently become "the bathers"--"Bald bathers folded their arms and talked to Mr. Podsnap on the hearthrug; sleek-whiskered bathers, with hats in their hands, lunged at Mrs. Podsnap and retreated ..." (I, xi, 135). Similar patterns of rhetoric can be seen in Dickens' satirical prose throughout Our Mutual

Friend. The repetition of the words "decent" and "mechanically" in the introduction of Bradley Headstone recalls the repetition of "new" in the first appearance of the Veneerings, establishing a keynote by which his subsequent actions will be defined. Like Twemlow, Miss Peecher is an object, or rather several objects, one of which happens to be a human being: "Small, shining, neat, methodical, and buxom was Miss Peecher; cherry-cheeked and tuneful of voice. A little pincushion, a little housewife, a little book, a little workbox, a little set of tables and weights and measures, and a little woman, all in one" (II, i, 219).

The prevalence of these stylistic devices in Our Mutual Friend reveals a new severity in Dickens' analysis of the contemporary scene. The verbal emphasis, the skilful use of rhythm and repetition, the absence of redeeming human detail, all combine to reflect a world which is harsher and more menacing than the world of the previous novels. Dickens' prose tends to emphasise a certain dead mechanicality in much human behaviour, and the converse is also true of Our Mutual Friend: the physical world has come to acquire a sinister animation of its own. Podsnap's plate, for instance, is described as if it were some foul protoplasmic substance, only temporarily arrested into shapes of hideous ugliness:

> Hideous solidity was the characteristic of the Podsnap plate. Everything was made to look as heavy as it could, and to take up as much room as possible. Everything said boastfully, 'Here you have as much of me in my ugliness as if I were only lead; but I am so many ounces of precious metal worth so much an ounce;--wouldn't you like to melt me down?' A

> corpulent straggling epergne, blotched all over as if it had broken out in an eruption rather than been ornamented, delivered this address from an unsightly silver platform in the centre of the table....All the big silver spoons and forks widened the mouths of the company expressly for the purpose of thrusting the sentiment down their throats with every morsel they ate. (I, xi, 131)

At such moments one realises that Dickens himself is oppressed by the tastelessness and vulgarity of the world he is describing. Whereas the baroque excesses of Mr. Tulkinghorn's ceiling had been the occasion for an exercise of humorous fancy,[1] here the ugliness of interior design is seen as the manifestation of an oppressive attitude of mind. This is brought out brilliantly in the character of Georgiana, who has been so cowed by the surroundings of her home that when she goes out riding in the family phaeton she looks "like a dejected young person sitting up in bed to take a startled look at things in general, and very strongly desiring to get her head under the counterpane again" (I, xi, 130).

Throughout the novel objects and places are animated only to emphasise their oppressiveness. The City after business hours displays "the prostration of a spent giant" (III, xvi, 603); London is a "black shrill city, combining the qualities of a smoky house and a scolding wife" (I, xii, 145); Bradley Headstone's school is in a neighbourhood "which looked like a toy neighbourhood taken in blocks out of a box by a child of particularly incoherent mind, and set up anyhow":

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1. "...where Allegory, in Roman helmet and celestial linen, sprawls among balustrades and pillars, flowers, clouds, and big-legged boys, and makes the head ache--as would seem to be Allegory's object always, more or less" (B.H., x, 130).

> ...here, one side of a new street; there, a large solitary public-house facing nowhere; here, another unfinished street already in ruins; there, a church; here, an immense new warehouse; there, a dilapidated old country villa; then, a medley of black ditch, sparkling cucumber-frame, rank field, richly cultivated kitchen-garden, brick viaduct, arch-spanned canal, and disorder of frowsiness and fog. As if the child had given the table a kick and gone to sleep. (II, i, 218)

The "very hideous church" in Smith Square is the last in a line of depressing city churches in Dickens, but outdoes all the others in ugliness and insignificance, "with four towers at the four corners, generally resembling some petrified monster, frightful and gigantic, on its back with its legs in the air" (II, i, 221)

These grotesque metaphors contribute a sinister suggestiveness to the landscape of Our Mutual Friend, which is by turns chaotic, dirty, moody, and threatening. London is here a city without coherence, where new buildings have been allowed to grow up haphazardly among the old, and the wind "blows nothing but dust" (I, xii, 144). Its physical untidiness proclaims the neglect of authority and the hopelessness of the lives lived there, where "the set of humanity outward from the City is as a set of prisoners departing from gaol, and dismal Newgate seems quite as fit a stronghold for the mighty Lord Mayor as his own state-dwelling" (II, xv, 393).

This atmosphere of gloom and confusion is reinforced by a mood of physical disgust which pervades the imaginative world of Our Mutual Friend: Dickens' fascination with the processes of human and animal decay is here almost obsessive. We can see this, for example, in the lingering revulsion with which he describes the contents of Mr. Venus' taxidermist shop in Chapter vii of Book I: the "pieces of leather and dry stick" in the window, the preserved

frogs, the dead bird on the counter, the Hindoo baby on the chimney-piece, the molars in the coffee-pot, the "'human warious'" amongst which Silas Webb hopes to find his amputated leg. Dickens savours this panorama of organic decomposition with a morbid relish, made the more unpleasant by his rather feeble efforts at a grotesque whimsy. "'Oh dear me, dear me!' sighs Mr. Venus, heavily, snuffing the candle, 'the world that appeared so flowery has ceased to blow!...'" (I, vii, 81). The whole episode is in the worst possible taste.

Almost as unpleasant, although much more relevant to Dickens' purpose in the novel, is his treatment of Lady Tippins. In some respects she is a reprise of Mrs. Skewton, the Cleopatra of Dombey and Son, but a comparison between the two characters reveals a marked severity in the later portrait. Physically, Lady Tippins partakes of the Veneerings' unreality--"an immense obtuse drab oblong face, like a face in a tablespoon, and a dyed Long Walk up the top of her head, as a convenient public approach to the bunch of false hair behind" (I, ii, 10)--but the disgust which Dickens feels for her breaks through in a macabre image, when he observes "a certain yellow play in Lady Tippins's throat, like the legs of scratching poultry" (I, ii, 12). Whereas Cleopatra had only been disgusting in the context of her nightly transformation at the hands of her maid, Lady Tippins is felt to be so in the full flush of her artificial bloom; no one is deceived by her pretence at youthfulness, and the business with her "lovers" is a chilling performance, as her fan "taps away at the men in all directions, with something of a grisly sound suggestive of the clattering of Lady Tippins's bones"

(III, xvii, 624). She is even compared to a corpse by Eugene Wrayburn, who observes of Radfoot's drowned body that it is "' not much worse than Lady Tippins'" (I, iii, 24).

Underlying the mood of physical disgust in the book is Dickens' open recognition of his own obsession with the fact of death. We have already seen some evidence of this in the Uncommercial Traveller articles, and it emerges strongly in "Some Recollections of Mortality," an Uncommercial piece written a year before the start of Our Mutual Friend.[1] Here Dickens describes three encounters with the dead which have remained in his memory--a visit to the Paris Morgue, the drowned body of a woman in a London canal, and a Coroner's Inquest on a pauper's child in the parish workhouse. The morbidity of the piece is mitigated by that eye for significant detail and unsentimental compassion which are the characteristics of Dickens' best journalism. He is fascinated by the tiny corpse of the child laid out among the coffins in the workhouse, and by the eagerness of the Paris crowd to see the body of an old man who had been accidentally killed in the streets: as they stare at the corpse every face shows a common expression "of looking at something that could not return a look."[2] But the most striking episode in the article is Dickens' account of how, in the winter of 1861, he had followed a cab to the Regent's Park canal and discovered there, lying dead on the tow-path, a young woman dressed in black:

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1. A.Y.R., IX, 16 May 1863, 276-80; U.T., pp. 188-98.
2. A.Y.R., IX, 278; U.T., p. 192.

> So dreadfully forlorn, so dreadfully sad, so dreadfully mysterious, this spectacle of our dear sister here departed! A barge came up, breaking the floating ice and the silence, and a woman steered it. The man with the horse that towed it, cared so little for the body, that the stumbling hoofs had been among the hair, and the tow-rope had caught and turned the head, before our cry of horror took him to the bridle. At which sound the steering woman looked up at us on the bridge, with contempt unutterable, and then looking down at the body with a similar expression--as if it were made in another likeness from herself, had been informed with other passions, had been lost by other chances, had had another nature dragged down to perdition--steered a spurning streak of mud at it, and passed on.[1]

Dickens here achieves a compassionate realism which is mostly absent in his fictional response to death. The callousness of the woman on the barge brings out the horror and tragedy of the suicide, and suggests the human indifference which brought it about. Dickens does not have to moralise the death: its very randomness and anonymity give it a representative significance.

This passage anticipates the deaths by drowning in Our Mutual Friend and that "sense of man's precarious presence in life" which, as K.J. Fielding has pointed out,[2] is a dominant theme of the novel. When Rogue Riderhood is brought out half-drowned from the river, everyone in the Six Jolly Fellowship-Porters works hard to save his life. "No one has the least regard for the man: with them all, he has been an object of avoidance, suspicion, and aversion; but the spark of life within him is curiously separable from himself now, and they have a deep interest in it, probably because it is life, and they are living and must die" (III, iii, 443). And when

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1. A.Y.R., IX, 278-79; U.T., p. 194.
2. Charles Dickens, p. 234.

Riderhood struggles back to life again, Dickens reflects that "like us all, every day of our lives when we wake--he is instinctively unwilling to be restored to the consciousness of this existence, and would be left dormant, if he could" (III, iii, 444-45). Throughout the novel we are made to feel the uneasy proximity of death to life, and the strange attraction death holds for those who are unwilling to return to "the consciousness of this existence"; it is associated with the river in which Hexam, Riderhood, and Bradley Headstone perish, and with the dark corners of the human mind where, like Jenny Wren in her rooftop garden, it offers a fantasy release from the oppression of existence. The river is the dominant symbol of death and the relentless flow of life towards death, and as such it is a touchstone of reality in the novel; here the debris of civilisation collects, along with the violence and brutality which are the fruits of "Society's" exploitation. It is a place of sudden and arbitrary death from which John Harmon and Eugene Wrayburn barely escape, a dehumanised world stalked by predators like Riderhood, whose shapeless footprints in the slush give the impression that "the very fashion of humanity had departed from his feet" (I, xii, 157).

The river and the dust-mounds provide complex images for the moral disgust which informs Our Mutual Friend, and for Dickens' obsession with death, decay, and social confusion; they are powerful counterparts to the harsh severity of his satirical vision. The novel reveals a world which is being laid waste by the irresponsibility of financial greed and the social polarities which money

creates, and Dickens' imaginative grasp of these polarities is impressively sure. What is less certain is his attempt to present a convincing personal resolution of the issues with which his satire deals. It is characteristic of Dickens' avowed intention to "try to sweeten the lives and fancies of others" if he himself were soured,[1] that he should continue to show the triumph of virtue in a corrupt world and to assert the power of goodness to withstand the forces of evil. There is nothing facile about the tenacity with which he held on to this moral optimism, but by the time of Our Mutual Friend it had become increasingly difficult to reconcile with the disturbing implications of his deeper response to life. At several significant stages in the novel we can detect an uncertainty in Dickens' handling of the individual characters--an uncertainty which amounts, I would suggest, to a simplification of the book's more powerful and pessimistic communication of moral ambiguity, despair, and social confusion.

III

Like the earlier novels of society, Our Mutual Friend is built upon a complex inter-relationship between the public and the private world. "Society" is brought into contact, through Wrayburn and Lightwood, with the life of the river, with the Hexam family, and with Rogue Riderhood; this working class milieu is in turn related to the Ragged Schools in which Charley Hexam and Bradley Headstone

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1. Coutts, p. 370; letter of 8 April 1860.

had begun their uneasy rise in social station, and to Jenny Wren, in whose house Lizzie Hexam is a lodger, and through whom she meets Riah and his employer, Fascination Fledgeby, himself a member of "Society." The Boffins are brought into "Society" by the wealth they inherit from John Harmon's supposed death, and through them a connection is established with the lower middle class Wilfer family, with Silas Wegg and Venus, and with the virtuous poor like Betty Higden and Sloppy. The social patterning is complicated, but each area is clearly defined and, as Hillis Miller remarks, "Our Mutual Friend everywhere gives evidence that for Dickens in his last completed novel no one can escape his given place."[1] Nor are the connections between the various strata of society fortuitous: the structure of the novel testifies to Dickens' continuing interest in the moral relationship between civilisation and the underworld, in the ambiguities surrounding the attempt to rise in station, and in the possibility of love between individuals across the barriers of class and money.

Our Mutual Friend continues the concern of Great Expectations with the power of money to buy gentility, and with the struggle for respectability on the part of those who wish to escape from humble origins. But there are significant differences between the two novels in their respective treatments of the class issue. Pip's story had been a deeply sympathetic study of the self-improve-idea, but in Our Mutual Friend this idea has turned sour: Pip reappears as Bradley Headstone and Charley Hexam, who are shown to

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1. Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels, p. 279.

be odious meritocrats jealously guarding their hard-won respectability. And whereas the idea of the gentleman had been essentially classless in Great Expectations, with Pip at the end blessing Joe as a "'gentle Christian man,'" Dickens seems to have fallen back on a more traditional concept of gentility in the later novel. Eugene Wrayburn and Mortimer Lightwood, who had been "boys together at a public school" (I, iii, 19), now embody his social alternative to the bourgeois vulgarity of the Veneerings. In a revulsion from the contemporary world, Dickens had come to reject many of the characteristic Victorian attitudes, and we can see an important expression of his changing outlook in his treatment of Wrayburn and Headstone.

As Angus Wilson has pointed out, Steerforth is redeemed in Eugene Wrayburn: "Loneliness, failure, pride, bitter rejection of all that made up Victorian progress and Victorian morality, a considered rejection of duty and hard work as moral ends, Dickens comes through to acceptance of these in the person of Eugene Wrayburn."[1] He is the spokesman for Dickens' own sense of the monotony of "Society," and his ennui is treated with sympathetic respect: "'If there is a word in the dictionary under any letter from A to Z that I abominate, it is energy'" (I, iii, 20). On the other hand, the earnestness which had been a

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1. "The Heroes and Heroines of Dickens," Review of English Literature, II (1961), 18.

characteristic Dickensian imperative in the earlier novels--one thinks of Betsey Trotwood's recommendation of "'deep, downright, faithful earnestness'"[1]--now turns up, twisted and obsessive, in Bradley Headstone's tormented feelings for Lizzie Hexam. "'I only add that if it is any claim on you to be in earnest,'" he tells her, tearing the mortar from the graveyard wall, "'I am in thorough earnest, dreadful earnest'" (II, xv, 397). And not only earnestness; respectability, thoroughness, perseverance, are repudiated in the awkward figure of the schoolmaster.

Yet the rejection of Headstone and the redemption of Wrayburn amount to an over-correction of earlier attitudes: the balance of Great Expectations is missing. If Dickens withholds sympathy from Headstone, then he surely concedes too much to Wrayburn. The opposition of class and temperament between the two men is a striking conception, but it is handled uneasily; Dickens does manage to suggest depths of possibility in Wrayburn, but these are too often confused with the "ease" and "gaiety" and superficial charm which (as in Steerforth) we are meant to find interesting and amusing. The basic idea behind Wrayburn's pursuit of Lizzie Hexam is also an excellent one, and original: the gentleman is drawn to the working class girl out of a need for the qualities which she derives from her environment and which are absent from his own--strength, vitality, physical passion, a contact with work and the realities of the river. But Lizzie fails to embody these qualities in her speech and behaviour, and Wrayburn's need of them is insufficiently

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1. D.C., xxxv, 504.

differentiated from his insolence to social inferiors and that insensitivity to the feelings of others which he shows in his dealings with Riah and Jenny Wren. The social significance of their relationship is marred by Dickens' exploitation of the more traditional ambiguities in the situation, and the result is frequently a rather gratuitous moral frisson:

> He knew his power over her. He knew that she would not insist upon his leaving her. He knew that, her fears for him being aroused, she would be uneasy if he were out of her sight. For all his seeming levity and carelessness, he knew whatever he chose to know of the thoughts of her heart.
>
> And going on at her side so gaily, regardless of all that had been urged against him; so superior in his sallies and self-possession to the gloomy constraint of her suitor, and the selfish petulance of her brother; so faithful to her, as it seemed, when her own stock was faithless; what an immense advantage, what an overpowering influence were his that night!... (II, xv, 406)

Similarly, at the end of the novel, Wrayburn's salvation comes from the outside, and when Twemlow asserts that "'he is the greater gentleman for [marrying Lizzie], and makes her the greater lady'" (IV, xvii, 819), we do not have that sense of moral resolution implicit in Pip's "' God bless this gentle Christian man!'" Lizzie has to work hard for her gentleman, and the implication is that she is fortunate to get him.

The confrontation between Wrayburn and Headstone in Book II, Chapter vi, is one of the most powerful scenes in the novel, and also one of the most disturbing, because Dickens' own prejudices are apparent throughout. Headstone has accompanied Charley Hexam to the lawyer's rooms, where the boy protests against Wrayburn's scheme to finance Lizzie's education; he has a good case, but it is

spoiled by his selfishness: "'...how comes he to be taking such a liberty without my consent, when I am raising myself in the scale of society by my own exertions and Mr. Headstone's aid, and have no right to have any darkness cast upon my prospects, or any imputation upon my respectability, through my sister?'" (II, vi, 290). It is the social insecurity of the two schoolmasters which Dickens stresses, and he comments after this "poor" speech that "Bradley Headstone, used to the little audience of a school, and unused to the larger ways of men, showed a kind of exultation in it" (II, vi, 290). The comment reveals Dickens' attitude to what is taking place; as Philip Collins remarks, "we are invited to identify ourselves with 'the larger ways of men,' the world which includes the self-possessed Eugene Wrayburn and his friend Mortimer Lightwood ..."[1] When Hexam has finished, his mentor remains behind to face the two gentlemen:

> 'You think me of no more value than the dirt under your feet,' said Bradley to Eugene, speaking in a carefully weighed and measured tone, or he could not have spoken at all.
> 'I assure you, Schoolmaster,' replied Eugene, 'I don't think about you.'
> 'That's not true,' returned the other; 'you know better.'
> 'That's coarse,' Eugene retorted; 'but you don't know better.'
> 'Mr. Wrayburn, at least I know very well that it would be idle to set myself against you in insolent words or overbearing manners. That lad who has just gone out could put you to shame in half-a-dozen branches of knowledge in half an hour, but you can throw him aside like an inferior. You can do as much by me, I have no doubt, beforehand.'
> 'Possibly,' remarked Eugene. (II, vi, 291)

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1. Dickens and Education, p. 166.

This is a painful moment in the novel. Dickens makes us feel Headstone's acute frustration: he has gone in for the ideals of his society--hard work, respectability, self-betterment--but with all his accomplishments he lacks the social equipment to penetrate his rival's easy insolence. There is insight into the man's predicament, but little sympathy: that goes to the cigar-smoking gentlemen, from whose perspective the episode is largely seen. Yet Dickens' identification with Wrayburn's attitude does not obscure our sense that, even in terms of his own code, the "gentleman" is here behaving badly--Twemlow would never have called Headstone "Schoolmaster." The whole scene is curiously lacking in moral focus, for although Dickens is voicing a preference for the ways of the traditional gentleman over those of the Victorian meritocrat, there is no convincing realisation of the traditional gentlemanly virtues of honour and decency in Wrayburn's behaviour. It is, in the end, "the larger ways of men" which Dickens falls back upon, something simpler and cruder than what Twemlow represents. This is true of Dickens' treatment of Wrayburn throughout the novel; he is an unsatisfactory spokesman for his creator's antagonism to the contemporary scene.

At the same time, his treatment of Bradley Headstone betrays this antagonism in an extreme form. It is indeed strange that Dickens, a lifelong champion of the popular education cause, should have left such a damning portrait of the trained schoolteacher in his last completed novel. The products of the new Training Colleges occupied a precarious social position in mid-Victorian

England: mostly from humble origins, they had to contend for the dignity of their profession against the kind of snobbery which Wrayburn displays in his dealings with Headstone, and also against the charge that they were over-educated for their function.[1] Dickens plays brilliantly on the social insecurity of Headstone and Hexam, and on the "curious mixture ...of uncompleted savagery, and uncompleted civilisation" (I, iii, 18), in their characters, but he shows little sympathy for their common struggle to better themselves. This is curious, coming after Great Expectations, and as I shall suggest later, there is a particular significance in the severity of Dickens' attitude to Bradley Headstone.

IV

The uncertainty which attends Dickens' characterisation of Eugene Wrayburn, and his failure to explore the full social implications of Wrayburn's relationship with Lizzie Hexam, is also evident in his treatment of Bella Wilfer. Here again the working out of an original conception leads ultimately to simplification. Bella is the first of Dickens' heroines in whom a more or less convincing sexuality is combined with spirit and (as her name suggests) wilfulness. It is her display of childish bad temper

1. The social condition of the schoolteacher had been highlighted in the "Revised Code" controversy of 1861-62: Robert Lowe's scheme for payment by results, while ostensibly an attempt to improve the efficiency of the State system, in fact struck at the whole Training College movement and at the dignity of the profession; see Asher Tropp, The School Teachers (1957), pp. 78-93.

in the street which leads old Harmon to include her in his will, and she reveals a similar capacity for anger and the expression of frustration as a woman. Her inner tensions are successfully rendered in the early scenes--the conflict between her hatred for the shabby gentility of her home and her affection for her father, her ambivalent response to the prospect of wealth--and they emerge in the appealing frankness of her conversations with her father:

> 'And now, Pa,' pursued Bella, 'I'll make a confession to you. I am the most mercenary little wretch that ever lived in the world.'
> 'I should hardly have thought it of you, my dear,' returned her father, first glancing at himself, and then at the dessert.
> 'I understand what you mean, Pa, but it's not that. It's not that I care for money to keep as money, but I do care so much for what it will buy!'
> 'Really, I think most of us do,' returned R.W.
> 'But not to the dreadful extent that I do, Pa. O-o!' cried Bella, screwing the exclamation out of herself with a twist of her dimpled chin. 'I AM so mercenary!'
> With a wistful glance R.W. said, in default of having anything better to say: 'About when did you begin to feel it coming on, my dear?'
> 'That's it, Pa. That's the terrible part of it. When I was at home, and only knew what it was to be poor, I grumbled, but didn't so much mind. When I was at home expecting to be rich, I thought vaguely of all the great things I would do. But when I had been disappointed of my splendid fortune, and came to see it from day to day in other hands, and to have before my eyes what it could really do, then I became the mercenary little wretch I am.' (II, viii, 319-20)

A girl like this would indeed be susceptible to the dubious moral atmosphere of "Society." The ambiguity of her attitude to wealth makes her a fitting protagonist in a novel where greed and avarice are concealed beneath the blandishments of Lammle and the false youthfulness of Fascination Fledgeby. There are moments in the development of her character when Dickens does manage to suggest the

complex temptations which face a spirited and attractive girl in this world, but they remain only suggestions: she is never brought into sustained contact with "Society," and instead Dickens chooses to convert her through the device of Mr. Boffin's impersonation, his pretended decline and fall under the influence of fortune.

Boffin's performance has been found unconvincing by many readers. Chesterton thought that Dickens had changed his mind in midstream about Boffin's character, but the evidence of the text and number plans indicates that this was not so.[1] The problem is rather one of a conflict between the convention in which Dickens is working with Boffin, and the more insidious manifestations of financial corruption elsewhere in the novel. For Boffin is very much an earlier Dickensian type: the reformed and unreformed Scrooge meet in his impersonation of miserliness, and although Dickens does manage to suggest the negative potential of his benevolence through this device, he belongs to a traditional mode, akin to the misers whose lives he likes to read. But the whole point about the evil of money in Our Mutual Friend is that it does not declare itself in such easily recognisable forms. In Chapter xiii of Book III, for example, we are shown how Fledgeby operates, getting Riah to do the dirty work while he earns credit in the eyes of Twemlow and Jenny Wren by pretending to plead with his subordinate:

> 'Mr. Twemlow is no connexion of yours, Mr. Riah,' said Fledgeby; 'you can't want to be even with him for having through life gone in for a gentleman and hung on to his Family. If Mr. Twemlow has a contempt for business, what can it matter to you?'

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1. See Ernest Boll, "The Plotting of Our Mutual Friend," Modern Philology, XLII (1944), 96-122; also Fr. F.X. Shea, "No Change of Intention in Our Mutual Friend," Dickensian, LXIII (1967), 37-40.

> 'But pardon me,' interposed the gentle victim, 'I have not. I should consider it presumption.'
> 'There, Mr. Riah!' said Fledgeby; 'isn't that handsomely said? Come! Make terms with me for Mr. Twemlow.'
> The old man looked again for any sign of permission to spare the poor little gentleman. No. Mr. Fledgeby meant him to be racked.
> 'I am very sorry, Mr. Twemlow,' said Riah, 'I have my instructions. I am invested with no authority for diverging from them. The money must be paid.' (III, xiii, 573)

It is an unpleasant scene, and Fledgeby's part in it is an altogether more sinister performance than Boffin's two chapters later, when we see "The Golden Dustman at his Worst." Both are performances in what Robert Garis has called the "Dickens Theatre," but whereas the one episode belongs to the world of Veneering and Podsnap, Boffin speaks like the side-hugging, hand-rubbing misers of the early novels--"'Win her affections ...and possess her heart! Mew says the cat, Quack-quack says the duck, Bow-wow-wow says the dog! Win her affections and possess her heart! Mew, Quack-quack, Bow-wow!'" (III, xv, 596). We are asked to accept this as a spectacle of money's corrupting power which is convincing to Bella, but when set against Fledgeby, Boffin the miser seems an innocent. The fact that she is deceived by it makes her conversion doubtfully serious; she is charming enough, but her change of heart belongs to a world of fairy-tale which co-exists uneasily with the world of Fledgeby and the Lammles. She is changed only at the expense of more interesting possibilities hinted at in Dickens' earlier presentation of her character.

It is not surprising, then, to find her a domesticated little wife in the Fourth Book, with her bunch of keys and "The Complete British Housewife," studying the City Intelligence for her husband

and "stitching away with a regular sound, like a sort of dimpled little charming Dresden-china clock by the very best maker" (IV, xi, 743). This sort of thing represents the worst possible concession to the convention of the romantic ending. "'I want to be something so much worthier than the doll in the doll's house'" (IV, v, 679), Bella tells her husband, but it is as a doll in a doll's house that she ends up in the novel. There is a lack of energy and conviction in Dickens' affirmation of their romantic love, and it shows in a weariness of style:

> So, she leaning on her husband's arm, they turned homeward by a rosy path which the gracious sun struck out for them in its setting. And oh, there are days in this life, worth life and worth death. And oh, what a bright old song it is, that oh, 'tis love, 'tis love, 'tis love, that makes the world go round! (IV, iv, 671)

One has only to compare this with the subdued grandeur of Little Dorrit--"They went quietly down into the roaring streets, inseparable and blessed ..."--to realise that Dickens heart is not in it.

At moments like these, and in Dickens' later suggestion that the Harmon gold had "'turned bright again'" in the hands of John and Bella, one comes close to the heart of the problem posed by Our Mutual Friend. It is not merely that the tone is misleading and the attitudes expressed contradictory of the more serious implications of the novel, there is also a lack of energy in the writing which implies that Dickens himself no longer believes in the affirmations he is making. The weak optimism of these scenes does not command belief when set against the dark force of Dickens' real inspiration in the book--the great images of despair and

confusion in the London landscape, the harsh energy of his satire, Bradley Headstone's tormented wanderings. Our Mutual Friend lives in the power of its pessimism, and it is significant that the most vital character in the novel, Bradley Headstone, should also be the villain. Indeed, it is Dickens' treatment of Headstone, I would suggest, which reveals his imaginative preoccupations most clearly.

On page 19 of the "Memoranda Book" there is a note which reveals that one starting-point for the novel was the idea of a character with a double identity: "Leading Incident for a story. A man--young and eccentric?--feigns to be dead, and is dead to all intents and purposes external to himself, and for years retains that singular view of life and character. Done Rokesmith." It is plain that the character of Rokesmith did not allow Dickens a very full exploration of this idea, and he gets lost in the tangles of an improbable plot. But the idea of double identity, of a man at odds with himself and his environment, is very forcibly expressed in Bradley Headstone:

> Bradley Headstone, in his decent black coat and waistcoat, and decent white shirt, and decent formal black tie, and decent pantaloons of pepper and salt, with his decent silver watch in his pocket and its decent hair-guard round his neck, looked a thoroughly decent young man of six-and-twenty. He was never seen in any other dress, and yet there was a certain stiffness in his manner of wearing this, as if there were a want of adaptation between him and it, recalling some mechanics in their holiday clothes. (II, i, 217)

From his first appearance the keynote of the schoolmaster's character is the discrepancy between a violent inner nature and the respectability which his profession requires of him. As the novel progresses, the violence in his personality gradually erupts through

the surface composure, until at the opening of the final Book we see him in bargeman's clothes, stalking Eugene Wrayburn: "And whereas, in his own schoolmaster clothes, he usually looked as if they were the clothes of some other man, he now looked, in the clothes of some other man, or men, as if they were his own" (IV, i, 631).

As a study in psychological self-division, Bradley Headstone is one of the successes of Our Mutual Friend, and here Dickens confronts the problem of dual identity with a penetration that is quite lacking in his treatment of John Handford-Rokesmith-Harmon. But Headstone is the villain of the piece and Harmon, in a rather anonymous way, the hero; more particularly, the schoolmaster is turned into a villain with a thoroughness that seems almost unjust, considering his painful social situation and the intensity with which Dickens makes us feel his sexual jealousy. He drives his rival into the arms of Lizzie Hexam; he is repudiated by his former pupil; and in a final, cruel irony is hounded to death by Rogue Riderhood, who attempts to blackmail him through his power over the one person who still cares for him, Miss Peecher: "'That Missis is sweet enough upon you, Master, to sell herself up, slap, to get you out of trouble. Make her do it then'" (IV, xv, 799). The question asks itself: why is Dickens so hard on Bradley Headstone?

Clearly, it would be foolish to assert that he is an auto-biographical creation in the sense that Pip or David Copperfield are, yet there are certain marked similarities between Headstone and

his creator. The schoolmaster has all Dickens' furious energy and vitality, and dramatised though it is as social insecurity, is the one character in the book to express at any length that conflict between a public and a private life which, I have argued, we can detect in Dickens himself at this time. At moments, indeed, he seems not unlike the Uncommercial Traveller striding through the night streets of London, when "the wild moon and clouds were as restless as an evil conscience in a tumbled bed, and the very shadow of the immensity of London seemed to lie oppressively upon the river."[1] Bradley Headstone may not be the spokesman for Dickens' displacement at this time, but I believe that in the career of the schoolmaster turned criminal he expressed very completely, if unconsciously, his own divided feelings about the life he was leading. Given the moral categories within which Dickens was working, and his own adherence to them, these feelings could not be treated sympathetically in a character who was also the hero; we see this clearly in John Harmon. But in a character who was established as a villain, Dickens was able to explore very powerfully and dramatically some of the consequences of a life lived in disguise. Not surprisingly, he visits upon Headstone the full rigours of retributive justice, for nothing is more symptomatic of the ambiguity I have traced in Dickens' changing moral outlook than the fact that the character in Our Mutual Friend most likely to express it should be turned into a murderer.

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1. "Night Walks," A.Y.R., III, 21 July 1860, 349; U.T., p. 129.

It seems better to leave this study of Dickens with his last complete novel, than to follow him into the increasingly mysterious life he evidently led during his last few years. But it is perhaps significant that in Edwin Drood he returned once again to the landscape of his earliest memories: Cloisterham is Rochester, and "all things in it are of the past" (iii, 19). And in this novel, which is something of a valediction, Dickens pays his final tribute to the permanence of the past for those "who come back from the outer world at long intervals to find the city wonderfully shrunken in size";

> To these, the striking of the Cathedral clock, and the cawing of the rooks from the Cathedral tower, are like voices of their nursery time. To such as these, it has happened in their dying hours afar off, that they have imagined their chamber-floor to be strewn with the autumnal leaves fallen from the elm-trees in the Close: so have the rustling sounds and fresh scents of their earliest impressions revived when the circle of their lives was very nearly traced, and the beginning and the end were drawing close together. (xiv, 154)

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